

May 5, 2012  
Church Planting

*In Awe*  
Acts 1:1-11

**Opening words:** This morning we are instructed from the Books of Acts. It is important that you remember that the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are sequels. One person wrote both pieces of literature to continue a single story. Luke tells us about the life of Jesus and concludes at his resurrection. Acts tells us about the birth of this new organization called the church. Geography is important in the Books of Acts. The church began in the city of Jerusalem and soon spreads throughout their known world. For this reason the book begins by focusing on Peter and then switches to Paul, the greatest evangelist in the history of the church. This summer I am going to examine those Peter-dominated chapters. In the next two summers, I am going to look at the chapters dominated by Paul. I am going to combine both of those extended sermon series into one. I am going to call it *Church Planting*. However, that is then and this is now.

This is Ascension Day. It is a day to remember how Jesus left this world. According to the scriptures, it occurred forty days after his resurrection. The number forty is significant in the Bible. The rain fell forty days and nights on Noah's generation. The Hebrews wandered forty years in the wilderness. Jesus fasted forty days before he was tempted. For forty days Jesus appeared in his resurrected state and spoke about the kingdom of God. Our scripture lesson for today tells us after forty days Jesus ascended into heaven. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Acts 1:1-11. Let me call this message, *In Awe*.

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**Acts 1:1-11** <sup>1</sup> In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup> until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup> On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. <sup>5</sup> For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." <sup>6</sup> Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." <sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. <sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking

into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

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The date was June 13, 1948. The place was Yankee Stadium. The occasion was Babe Ruth Day. They came to remember and there was so much to remember. In 1927, Babe Ruth became the first player to hit sixty home runs in a single season. He hit 714 home runs in his career and had a career batting average of .342. In 1923, he hit .393. He was one of the first five to be voted into baseball’s Hall of Fame. He not only changed baseball; he saved baseball. There was so much to remember. Time can be a cruel thing. By June 1948 the great Bambino was only a shell of his younger self. He would never see Labor Day. Cancer would take his life. He was 53 years old. Babe Ruth Day would give the fans one more opportunity to express their appreciation. Goodbyes aren’t easy, especially if the one leaving will be gone a long time. It isn’t just true of athletes. It is true of everyone.

Have you ever had to say goodbye to a close friend or a loved one? I don’t mean the casual goodbyes we say at the end of a lunch or an accidental meeting. I mean the goodbyes we say when someone is passing. There will not be another reunion in this world. The next reunion will be in heaven. Those goodbyes are not easy. How do you compress all those experiences down to a few words? How do you compress your emotions down to a few words?

When I was young, we took a family vacation to the state of Maine. I remember it as a wonderful trip. The five of us climbed into the family car and saw the sites. We went to Maine for one reason. It was the home state of my father’s stepmother, my Grandma Helen. One day we connected with my grandparents in a place near Boothbay Harbor. She had cousins who lived there, Mary and Marge. They hosted everyone for lunch. I don’t remember what we ate, but I do remember the scenery. That rocky coastline was impressive. It must have been late in the afternoon when we started saying goodbye. I remember standing near my mother and sisters. Grandma Helen was saying goodbye to Mary and Marge. Without warning, they began to hug and cry. One of my sisters asked, “Why are they crying?” My mother answered, “When you are their age, you don’t know if you are going to see each other again. This may be their final goodbye.” Goodbyes aren’t easy. Some things don’t change. It wasn’t easy for the disciples to say goodbye to Jesus. Let us look at the text together.

We are looking at the opening words of the Book of Acts. The first three verses summarize everything that happened in the Gospel of Luke. (Remember, Luke and Acts are sequels.) Verse four is the beginning of something new. According to the text, Jesus had gathered the disciples around him. He tells them about the coming of the Holy Spirit. In the near future, the divine helper will touch each one of them and enable them to be his witnesses throughout the world. The only thing they had to do to was wait in Jerusalem. This is the truth. The disciples don’t have a clue. They expose their ignorance when they asked Jesus about the completion of the kingdom of God.

Jesus redirects the discussion back to the Holy Spirit. Then something happens that no one expects. Verse nine says he was taken up. He was levitated off the ground and raised so high that he was covered by a cloud. Not believing their own eyes, they were in awe. With their eyes squinting and their necks bent, they strained to get their last view of Jesus. It must have been one of those moments in life that they never forgot. They were so intent on getting one more view of Jesus that two men dressed in white had to nudge them back to reality.

On this Ascension Sunday we remember that experience. The disciples must have been overwhelmed as they stood there. It was almost cruel to expect the disciples to accept so much in such a short amount of time. In short, they were in awe. They were in awe of what they were **experiencing**. Watching someone drift into the sky is not a daily experience. They were in awe of what they had **experienced** with Jesus. The most significant chapter of their lives was over. Things would never be the same again. They were in awe of what they would **experience**. The task of evangelizing the world seemed impossible. It is those three things I want to talk about today. I want to be quick because this is Communion Sunday. So if you are ready to begin, say, **Amen!** They were in awe because of what they were experiencing.

### **Experiencing**

During the last full week of July, fifteen from our congregation will be part of the Group Workcamp in Jamestown, New York. Annually, we send our youth to such camps. I have no clue how many have participated over the years. They think they are going to help people in that community. They are really going to experience Jesus. There is something about serving a stranger away from home that draws you closer to Jesus. Group reports that 90% of campers find themselves closer to Jesus after going than they were before coming. They have some fundraising to do, so I hope you support them. Sometime during the month of August they are going to report on their trip. Each one will stand up and report on their week. The friends they made. The people they helped. The worship and devotions they experienced. They will do their best, but they will not be able to capture the experience. Have you ever told someone about something you experienced but the words came up short? It may have been the time you went to church camp? It may have been the time you went on a mission trip? It may have been the time a baby was born? It may have been your family vacation? It may have been that time you were extra close to God? It difficult it is to find the right words to match certain experiences.

First, they were in awe of what they were experiencing. The words in the scripture lesson for today are just shadows of what really happened. How do you describe a miracle? How do you describe ascension? When was the last time your words couldn't capture an experience? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" They were in awe of what they were experiencing. They were in awe of what that had experienced.

## Experienced

Earlier this week, a celebration was held to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the opening of the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC. The keynote speakers were former president Bill Clinton and Elie Wiesel. This was a special celebration because the generation that remembers the holocaust is dying so rapidly. I have been there several times. I can't say it is entertaining, but it is important that you go. The holocaust can't be forgotten so we don't make the same mistake again. I will never forget the bags filled with human hair or the mountain of worn shoes. I was in awe of the magnitude of human cruelty.

Second, the disciples were in awe of the ministry of Jesus. They were in awe of everything they had experienced with Jesus. Think of everything they had experienced with Jesus. Time is not always what is important. They had only been with Jesus for three years. How many relationships do you have that are older than three years? Just think about everything they had experienced during those three years! There is more to a relationship than time. There is significance. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** They were in awe of what they were experiencing. They were in awe of what they had experienced. They were in awe of what they would experience. Look at the text with me.

## Experience

They were pre-Pentecost disciples. They have just been told they are to go into the world and witness for and about Jesus. I can't think of one group less qualified for this task. They knew very little. They understood very little. They were unprepared and unequipped. You would be hard pressed to find a group that was more impotent. They were in awe because of the things they would experience in the future.

The Great Commission says we are to go out and make disciples in the world. We are to baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:19) Does anyone here feel qualified for that task? Is it possible we have no energy left to make disciples because we spend all of our energy maintaining our building and meeting the budget? Or, maybe our problem is deeper? Maybe we are like those pre-Pentecost disciples. We have heard about the Holy Spirit but we don't understand it; we have heard about the Holy Spirit but we have never experienced it. During this summer we are going to be going to be looking at the Book of Acts. I ask that you begin to pray for that sermon series now. Pray for two things. First, pray that by Labor Day you will have a clearer understanding of the Holy Spirit. Second, pray that by Labor Day you will experience the Holy Spirit. Never forget, Jesus expects us to make as many disciples as possible. We have no hope without the Holy Spirit. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

As we come to this Communion table, let us use our sanctified imaginations and imagine Jesus ascending into heaven. His work is done. Our work is just beginning. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**