

## **This I Believe – The Hope of the World**

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March 17, 2024

Acts 1:8; 2:37-47

### **Acts 1:8**

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

### **Acts 2:37-47**

*<sup>37</sup> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” <sup>38</sup> Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” <sup>40</sup> And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” <sup>41</sup> So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. <sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds<sup>[b]</sup> to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

Your bulletin says that Rev. Katie Montgomery Mears is preaching today. That’s a bulletin error because her flights from Colorado were canceled yesterday. So, this is a 3 p.m. on a Saturday afternoon sermon that you’re hearing here. She sent me all of her stuff; she’s the research assistant, and I’m the preacher today.

Let's pray together. *Gracious and loving God, open us up. Open our eyes that we might see, our ears that we might hear, our hearts that we might feel, and then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

When I was 20 years old, I was making a decision about whether to be a pastor or an attorney. I was actually already in seminary. I had really been planning to be an attorney throughout college, but I'd worked as a youth pastor during college to make ends meet. I'd received a scholarship to go to seminary, so I went to seminary to really kill a couple of years until my wife finished with her degree. But I was toying with the idea of being a pastor, so I entered what they called the candidacy process. It's a process you go through on your way to ordination. The first step is that you sit down with your pastor and talk about whether you feel a call to ministry. Ray Porter was my pastor at First United Methodist Church in Carbondale, Illinois. And I went into his office, and in the midst of that conversation, he said, "Tom, I know you love Jesus. I've seen you working. But do you love the church?" I thought for a minute, and he went on, "And if you become a pastor, that's who you're going to hang out with all the time. You're going to be with 'church people.' Do you love the church?" He went on to explain that a call into ministry is not simply a call to be a representative of Christ that ordination is what we call a representative ministry. You represent the church. And when you put the stole on – this stole – this is not a stole not to be just a yoke of Christ. This is a stole of the yoke of the church that you're speaking for and guiding and forming, shaping a church. Do you love the church?

I had to really think about that. On the one hand, the church had nurtured and cared for me through some of my most difficult times, and I had come into this loving community of a youth group when I was in high school. It just changed my life in every positive way you could think of. It was just awesome – I loved that part of the church. But then I'd gone as a youth pastor, and I saw how some of the sausage was made, you know. And you see how things happen, and you see conflict in the church, and you see people saying ugly things about each other sometimes. I was thinking, "Wow. I don't know. Do I love the church?" I had to really think about it.

I thought I had all those things that a lot of people have about the church, that it's judgmental and the people are narrow-minded. You can go through all of those things, and then it occurred to me that by being so judgmental of their judgmentalness, I was probably more judgmental than they were by saying, "Gosh, those aren't perfect people." Then I realized,

“Gosh, maybe this is a group I can fit in with.” I’m glad there are hypocrites in the church, so there’s a place for me to belong. We’re not perfect. We are broken.

Here’s my question for you today. I’m going to put it this way. We’ve been looking at what I believe and what each of us believes. It says, “What do you believe about the church? Do you believe that the church breathed into life by the Holy Spirit is God’s primary ordained instrument for carrying out God’s purpose? Or do you believe it’s just another human institution along with so many others that God uses to bring about God’s will?”

Is the church breathed into life by the Holy Spirit as God’s primary ordained instrument for carrying out God’s purposes, or do you believe it’s just another human institution along with so many others that God uses to bring about God’s will?

So, let me tell you the story of the church. It begins in a place called Caesarea Philippi. Jesus has gathered his disciples. They have moved away from Judea from Jerusalem as far as they possibly can because John the Baptist has been beheaded. They’re sort of fleeing Herod Antipas. And when they get there, Jesus comes to realize that it’s time for him to go to the cross, and he wants to know if his disciples are ready. So, he asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they say that some say he’s John the Baptist, and others say that he’s Elijah and they mention others. So, he asks them, “Who do you say that I am?” And Simon Peter says, “You are the Christ, the only Son of the Living God.”

And Jesus says, “You know, God revealed that to you, Simon Peter. And on this rock...” Some say that means Peter is the rock. Some say it means his profession of faith is the rock. “but on this rock, I will build my church. And the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” He uses the word *ekklesia*, which means “a gathering or a movement.” It’s not really a word for an institution, by the way. It’s a word for a gathering of people, a movement of people. “Upon this rock, I will build my church, and we’re going to storm the gates of hell.”

The next thing you know, Jesus has been crucified and resurrected, and he appears to the disciples. He tells them, “I want you to hang out here. I want you to wait. Because the time is coming when you will be clothed with power from on high, and you will be my witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. So, you wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon you.” And they did. They waited 50 days and on the day of Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit pours into the believers, into all those people who are there, and they begin to do the very same things that Jesus was doing. They begin to live out his mission in the world.

The first thing that happens is Peter heals a man who is not able to walk. And they begin to preach just as Jesus had preached. Then, we get this marvelous description of what the church is like. What the community of the church is like in Acts 2:42-47, where it talks about them being devoted to one another. And that they spent time together and that wonders and signs were done through them. We'll talk about that a little at the end.

So, I want to move forward by sharing some distinctions and definitions with you. This sermon series is sort of a teaching time. The first thing is the distinction between a big "C" church and a little "c" church. When we talk about the "little c" church, we're talking about the institution of the church. The group of people is governed by various bodies. You know, whether it's Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, or even nondenominational individual churches with their elders and that sort of thing. That's the "Little C" church. That's the institution of the church.

When we talk about the "Big C" church, we're talking about the universal church, the whole church. And that means the connected or gathered believers wherever they are. So, on World Communion Sunday, we talk about being connected to all believers wherever they are connected together. Or gathered. That's the "Big C" church. When we say in the creeds, we usually use the Apostles' Creed because if we say the Nicene Creed, like today I don't have any time to preach because it's like ten minutes long. But in both, they say the words "The Holy Catholic Church." And they don't mean Roman Catholic; they mean the *universal church*. The church of all believers connected together.

That's the first distinction. The second thing I want to mention is the identity or the nature of the church. What the Bible teaches us is that the nature of the church is the Body of Christ. We are to be the tangible expression of Christ here on earth. At least seven times, St. Paul refers to the church as the Body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:17, he says, "You are the Body of Christ, and each one of you is a member of it. You are the arm, the nose, the toe, the elbow. Everybody is a part of this body that's joined together, and we together are the Body of Christ.

John Knox was the founder of the Presbyterian reformed movement in Scotland in the 1600s. And he had this one sentence that has really hit me. He said, "The *Sole Residuum* of the Christ event is the church." Meaning, "The only thing left after Jesus is crucified and resurrected is the church. There's nothing else." Do you believe that? That's one you'll have to wrestle with. The nature of the church is to be the Body of Christ.

If the nature of the church is to be the Body of Christ what is to be the mission of the church? Well, to continue Christ's work on earth – to do the things Christ did. To carry out that mission in the world around us. And what is Christ's mission? To redeem the world. To take a world that is broken apart from God and gather it back in again. To bring the world back into God's control. To bring the world back into God's preferred future for it.

That picture is, to me, so powerful of a God who is redeeming the world, and the church is the instrument of that. What does that mean? It means that we do what Jesus did. Jesus healed. Perhaps you aren't able to do those physical healings, but I will tell you that the church needs to be in the healing business. Whether that's at the hospitals that are formed by churches all over the world or whether that's bringing healing about in your family. Or bringing diverse people together communities together, as we're trying to do and are doing at our Gethsemane campus. Whether that's bringing people of different viewpoints together to worship God and to bring about that healing, we want to be in the healing business.

What else did Jesus do? Well, he cast out demons. Well, maybe we don't do demon possession casting out, but there are evil forces at work in the world, and the church's job is to stand up to the evil forces and push back the darkness in whatever way we possibly can. To do what Jesus did. Jesus reached out to the outcasts around us. Around him. And the church's job is to reach out to the people around us and tell them, "Come on in, there's a place for you here. Come on, you belong here. You fit in. You're part of us." Those people on the margins who maybe just don't feel like anybody really wants to sit with them and have dinner with them like Jesus did. He sat with the tax collectors and the sinners and the outcasts – we do that, too. That's our job. And everywhere he went, he taught and proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. So that's our job too.

What is it that helps us understand we can't do those things on our own? It's only by the power of the Holy Spirit breathing life into us that we can choose to be what God in Christ has called us to be. God's instrument to redeem the world.

I love the pictures we get in here of all of the things that happened in the early church. It says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and prayers." We learn together, and we grow together. "Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were done through the apostles." Yesterday, I had the privilege of being a part of a memorial service for a woman named Phoebe Catli on our Gethsemane

campus. She spent her life giving herself away as Jesus did. She organized a Sunday school class there. She came to the United States from the Philippines and moved into the little apartments on Bellaire Blvd. in 1972 by our Gethsemane campus. She organized a Sunday school class for people from all those different nations called the Kaleidoscope class. She and her husband Sam founded an orphanage in the Philippines called the House of Shiloh orphanage and supported it with their Sunrise Institute. And goes back every year until she passed away. Worked with Filipino nurses who came to the United States, so many came to the United States to work and to help them move into the culture with the Philippines Nurses Association. Many wonders and signs are done through the apostles. And there were a lot of them done through her.

And you only need to look at the things that happen through St. Luke's church to believe that, yes, there is brokenness around us, but you know God is doing many wonders and signs through the work that happens here at St. Luke's. "And having the goodwill of all the people, and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." The church is to be that magnetic community that invites people in that invites people to come. You don't see St. Paul saying, "Now go out into the highways and byways and hand people an invitation to come to church." Jesus says to go bring them in. But Paul's focus is on building these incredible magnetic communities of love and truth that other people would experience and be drawn to because there was something powerful that happened in their midst.

I'm really sad to tell you today that Paul Meyer passed away yesterday. Paul's a member of our church. A prince of a man. He and Carolyn have been a part of St. Luke's for a long time. I was visiting with him at the hospital on Thursday. He seemed to be doing just fine. And in that conversation, he told me again a story. That they had come to St. Luke's. He and Carolyn were from small churches, and they weren't sure about a big church. That someone – I don't know who – had told them that what they needed to do was find a Bible study, a small group, or a Sunday school class and a mission to be a part of. Find a place where they could meet people and discover community. He told me that. Then he said, "So on Mondays, I have my Emmaus group; on Tuesdays, I have my men's group; on Wednesdays, I have Men's Life; on Thursdays, I go to the Bible study..." And he kept saying all the ways he'd chosen to be a part of a real community.

That's what we experience when we see the life of the church, that early church. This magnetic community that Paul and Carolyn lived in. Every Thanksgiving, they had what they called their "orphan's Thanksgiving." They'd take anybody in the church who didn't have

somewhere to go, and they came to the home of Paul and Carolyn because they were that kind of welcoming, loving people.

My friends, yes, the church is broken. It has flaws; we fuss and fight, and all sorts of things happen. But I'm going to tell you that the Holy Spirit comes in and works through us regardless. And we're going to be God's choice for the instrument that God will use to keep working to redeem the world until Christ comes and finishes the job. That's our job.

Let's pray. *Lord God, we thank you for the church. With all its flaws, with all its problems, with all the divisions and difficulties. All of those issues. Yet we know that you are at work by the power of your Holy Spirit in us and through us. And so, where we're wrong correct us, God. But you, as that resilient God, will not give up on us and will continue to use us in your important mission, the mission you gave Jesus Christ, and we, as his body, will redeem the world. In the name of Christ, we pray, Amen.*