



Dr. James C. Howell
Acts 1:1-11
October 4, 2009

A superb question: Why do you stand looking up? Why do you stand looking up? At the last service, I sat on that side and I heard Kevin Wright on this side – is Kevin in the building? Let's just have him preach it again. It was really good. He talked about the way the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Lord, when will you restore your people?" and he responds by saying "My power will come upon you." We're asking, "Lord, when will you help those who are in need?" and the response is "My power will come upon you, my power will come upon you."

The first words of the book of Acts are in the first book, which is surprising. The book of Acts is Volume 2 of a two-volume work. The first volume is the Gospel of Luke. Luke tells about the life, teaching, healing, death and resurrection of Jesus. In Volume 2, the sequel, we come to the life of the church and the way it begins is that in Book 1, I told you the things that Jesus began to do, the implication being that for Christians and for the life of the church, we continue what Jesus began. Is there a continuity between who we are and what we do and what Jesus did? What Jesus began, where he went, whom he touched, the way he talked, his perspective, his obsession with God's will, his feeding of the hungry, his touching of the untouchables. And he did not do these things solo either. He called others around him and said "Let us go, let us heal, let us empower women, let us" – so many things that Jesus did.

After Jesus died and was raised from the dead, as Acts put it, he presented himself to them with many proofs. They needed proof. It is human nature to need proof that there is a God and what God is about; the way Jesus proved that he existed. He said, "Touch my body, look at my body. This is proof that I have a body." We are now called to be the Body of Christ. If there is any proof of Jesus' existence today, it is us, and we should say, "Look at us. Are we any proof of what Jesus was about?" It's why Holy Communion matters. Some of us think "Oh this is just something that we go through once in awhile" but it's something that really matters.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, felt that Holy Communion was what he called a converting ordinance. He thought it was so powerful that you could be out there and not even be a believer in Jesus, but the power of God resident in the bread and in the cup if you took it into yourself might actually change you into somebody that you were not when you walked in the door.

World Communion Sunday. It's one thing to celebrate the fact that we're doing this with Christians all over the world today and that's really a really neat and lovely thought, but I think there's far more to it than that. I think we are called on this day to continue what Jesus began. That is the task of the church all over the world. This is something to get our minds around because so much of what happens in our life does not have much continuity with what Jesus did and who he touched and what his life was about.

It's helpful to think about someone like Sr. Francis of Assisi. If we were Roman Catholics, on the Catholic calendar, today is the Feast Day of St. Francis. This is the day that St. Francis died in the year 1226. St. Francis was pretty amazing actually; in terms of continuing what Jesus began. St. Francis got up every day and he asked Jesus "What do you want me to do

today?" And the way that he patterned his life, he simply read the gospels and took that as his to-do list. Whatever he saw in the gospels, he thought he was supposed to do it. Jesus touched untouchable people so he said "I shall touch untouchable people this day." Jesus fed those who were hungry and he said "I will feed people today." Jesus went up on the mountain by himself to pray, and Francis said "I will go up on a mountain by myself to pray." Whatever Jesus did, he wanted to continue what Jesus began.

Francis had some peculiarities when it came to bread and eating. One time he was invited to a sumptuous dinner from a very wealthy person and they had various guests in to see this very famous guy, Francis of Assisi, and it was a sumptuous feast that was served. Many servers came and brought the most elegant foods that were imaginable, fine wines, and they said the blessing, and then Francis said, "Could I be excused for just a moment?" And they said, "Well, sure." He walked out of the house and went down into the street and found homeless people who were begging for bread, and he begged with them. Finally somebody came along and gave him a stale crust of bread, put it in his hand, and he walked back into the party where they had so much fantastic food and he put it on his plate and ate the food that the people in the street were eating that night while there was so much food on this table.

Another time Francis was on a journey and he came to a house at Montecastelli, and the person inside "There just were thieves here" and Francis said, "What did they take?" The man at the door said, "They just stole bread from us." And Francis said, "They must be hungry" and said, "Give me some bread and a bottle of wine. I want to apprehend these thieves." They said, "They went that-away." So Francis trailed down the road as fast as he could, and finally he caught up with the thieves who, at first, were nervous that they had been caught in their thievery, and then Francis said, "I understand that you are very hungry. I brought you some bread, and I brought you a bottle of wine. What I want you to do so that you won't be hungry tomorrow, if you eat this bread and drink this wine today, I want you to come back and live in the house with us, become one of our brothers. Pray with us, serve the poor with us." The thieves at first thought Francis had lost his mind, but there was food in that house. They didn't really want to be thieves, so they came back with Francis, and they stayed there and they became friars in the Order of St. Francis.

We are called to be the body of Christ. In Kevin's lovely sermon he quoted something I had not thought about for a long time. St. Augustine once said that "Hope has two beautiful daughters, and their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, Courage to see to it that things do not remain the way they are."

Kevin had just returned from Liberia. I was in Haiti three weeks ago. We send our people out all over the world and we send our people across the tracks right here in Charlotte, and we see the conditions under which many of God's children live. It's easier not to look, but if we look, we must get angry, and we must say, "It should not be this way." But it's one thing just to say, "It should not be this way." We also are called by God to have courage, to say, "Things will not remain the way they are."

The disciples looked up to Heaven and said, "Lord, when will you restore your people?" The response is "Why do you stand looking up? My power will come upon you." You are the Body of Christ. We continue what Jesus began. Thanks be to God for this high Holy privilege.
-Amen-