

May 8, 2016

Luke 24:44-50          Ascension

Empowered: Clothed With Power

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The first year that I moved to North Carolina, I spent a summer trying to dig in the red clay soil of my yard. It nearly killed me. So I bought a rototiller. I love my rototiller! I'm a much healthier man, and I'm pretty sure I'm even a better husband, because of my rototiller.

One day early this spring, my beloved rototiller wouldn't start. I checked the gas, the spark plug, the fuel line, the carburetor – everything I could think of. Finally, I loaded the rototiller on my truck to take it in to the shop. As I was getting into the truck, I happened to look one more time at the rototiller. There, on the side of the engine, I noticed the on/off switch, the power switch. "Wait a minute," I asked myself. "Did I forget to turn on the power switch today?" Imagine how foolish I felt when I flipped the switch, pulled the cord, and – presto! – the rototiller started right up.

Here in the church, we have power switches for the elevator, the AC units, the organ, the copy machine. There's a power switch for the projectors, for the PA system, and for all the lights in the sanctuary.

Let's leave the lights off for a few minutes this morning while we talk about where the real power in our church comes from. It doesn't come from Wake Electric, the power company. The real power in our church doesn't come from the pastors or the staff, or from the number of members we have, or from all children and youth who are active here, or from the amount of money that we give to keep Hope's ministry strong.

Where does the real power in our church come from? The answer is found where we always find our answers in this church: the Bible, the Word of God. The Bible tells us where the real power in our church comes from.

We read earlier from Luke chapter 24. We've been reading for the past six weeks, since Easter, about Jesus' various post-resurrection appearances to his disciples. God's power brought Jesus back to life, and God's power was clearly evident and active in the resurrected Christ. But God's power, we learn in today's reading, was leaving. Jesus was about to ascend back up to heaven. Jesus the miracle worker, Jesus the powerful preacher, Jesus the potent healer, was leaving.

Jesus had lived a perfect life, then given up his life on the cross as a payment for humanity's imperfections. His followers saw him alive again after Easter, and they knew now for sure that Jesus was the almighty, all-powerful Son of God. He was the source of power! But now he was leaving. Was the power cut off for good?

Wednesday afternoon here in church the power flickered a couple of times, then suddenly cut out. No lights, no computers, no coffeemaker. We called Wake Electric, and reported the outage. "We're aware," they said. "There are 2000 homes in the area without power, and we're trying to figure out what is causing the problem."

In our Bible story, the disciples had a power outage. But they knew what the problem was. Jesus was leaving.

And he was leaving them with a huge job to do, a complicated and daunting task. Listen to Jesus words again. "Thus it is written," he tells his disciples, "that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be

proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

What was their job? Proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all nations. That was the job Jesus left his church to do. And that is the job that our church – that every Christian congregation, that every Christian -- has still today: to proclaim Christ to the whole world.

How are we supposed to be able to do that? Where is the power in our church coming from?

Jesus tells us. “You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

He’s talking here about the Holy Spirit, isn’t he? The “promise of his Father” was that the Holy Spirit would empower his people to do his work: to prophesy and preach, to proclaim and share love, to spread the Good News. And next week, we’re going to read the story of Pentecost, when this promise came true. The Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus after his ascension, and the church was “clothed with power from on high,” just as Jesus said it would be.

And it’s no different today. The real power in our church comes not from you and me. It comes from on high.

Sometimes we rely too much on ourselves here at Hope. I do. You probably do, too. We envision only what we can accomplish, and we think of how much capacity we have. We limit ourselves to what we think we can do for Christ, and how we think it should get done.

But the power for ministry doesn’t come from us. It comes from on high. As God’s people here at Hope – as Christ’s

church here at Hope – we are clothed with power from on high. Hope could have never grown from a tiny mission church 19 years ago to a big, booming congregation without power from on high. Hope wouldn't be a growing church today, welcoming 41 new adult members and 24 more children and youth, if God's power -- Christ's power, the Spirit's power – were not at work here among us.

And, friends, we have more ministry work to do in this church. There are more people to reach for Christ. There are new neighborhoods springing up around us all the time. There are more children who need to learn about Jesus, and there are lost and hurting people out there who need the Lord.

It is our job. But, one more time, where does the real power in our church come from? Let's pray together to be clothed with power from on high.

Prayer