

Good morning, everyone! It's wonderful to be back with you! Our family had the most wonderful time the last few months. Many people have asked about our sabbatical—it was incredible! We loved every minute of it. We traveled to places we have never been, went on long hikes, laughed, played, and prayed. It was one of the greatest, most extravagant gifts I've received in my life. I have never felt this close to my kids, and I haven't felt this close to Keren since we were newlyweds. I feel a fresh sense of joy and wonder and friendship with the Lord. My heart is full. We cannot put into words how thankful we are for the gift that you gave us. This church is so kind, so loving, so supportive, so generous, and we are so grateful. As much as we loved our time away, we are really excited we are back home. It's good to wear a pair of pants with a button on them again.

I'd like to thank Gary, Chad, Jeff, and Emerson for leading us so powerfully from God's Word the last few months. Can we honor them and show our gratitude?

We are kicking off a new sermon series today that will take us all the way to November. This is a series I have been praying about for a long time. Sometimes I come home from work, and Keren has made a roast that has been simmering all day, and the moment I walk in, I'm overwhelmed by this incredible smell. It wasn't microwaved; it was given plenty of time to marinate and soak and simmer. That's what this series has been like in my heart and mind, and I am excited to preach through the book of Acts. Let me tell you some of the reasons you'll love the book of Acts.

The book of Acts shows us:

1. **The continued work of Jesus in the world.** The gospels tell us all about the life of Jesus and the ministry of Jesus, his death, burial, and resurrection, which is the bedrock foundation of our faith. But it's not like after Jesus rose from the dead, he made a couple resurrection celebrity appearances and then dropped the mic and said, "Peace—see you in heaven in a couple thousand years!" Jesus is still active and engaged in the world, and the book of Acts shows us how.
2. **The gift of the Holy Spirit.** Jesus promised his disciples that after he died on the cross and his blood purified and cleansed them, the Holy Spirit would come and live inside them. "But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). What's better than having the Son of God right next to you? Having the Spirit of God living inside of you. Think about what it used to be like getting around a new town. Twenty-five years ago, when I started driving, you'd stop at a gas station and ask somebody for directions. Can you even imagine that? They'd say, "Take an immediate left, go past three stop lights. You'll come to a corner where an old Dairy Queen used to be. Keep going until you see a big oak tree on the right—that's where you'll turn." That's how we used to do it! Now, we have a device in our car that tracks our every movement and tells us exactly what to do at every turn. The Holy Spirit not only lives inside us and guides us, but he also convicts us of sin, empowers us, strengthens us, and supercharges our prayers! Acts tells us more about the Holy Spirit than any other book in the Bible! If you want to learn about the Holy Spirit, grow in your relationship with the Spirit, and surrender to the Spirit, Acts is for you!
3. **The birth of the church.** In Acts 1, Jesus ascends into heaven; in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit is sent, the gospel is preached, thousands of people are saved, and the church is born! There is passionate prayer and worship, selflessness and generosity, rich biblical teaching and theology, dynamic community, courageous evangelism, and global mission. It's a beautiful and compelling picture

of the church at its birth. Notice I say it's a picture of the church at its birth, not necessarily the church at its best. The first days were not supposed to be the church's best days. The honeymoon stage of a marriage is wonderful, but if your wedding day was the best day of your marriage, you're doing marriage wrong. The first days are special, but they are supposed to be the foundation, not the pinnacle! Fortunately for us, Acts not only shows us the church at its brightest, but also how to deal with darkness. If you're looking for the perfect church, Acts is going to disappoint you. They had conflict. They had gossip. They had racism. They had disagreements over theology. They had people lying about money. In other words, they had people. Acts is a picture of a real church, with real imperfections, with God working amidst all of it!

4. **The growth of the church.** Acts starts out with 120 people who believe in and follow Jesus, all in one small area of the world. Then, in only one city, it grows to three thousand, to five thousand, to the point where they stop keeping track of numbers. Then persecution comes, but rather than pouring water on the church, the persecution causes embers of the fire to spread everywhere. Within two decades, there are tens of thousands of Christians all over the Roman Empire and beyond, tearing down walls and restoring God's purposes for humanity all along the way. Think about it! When they started, they had no money, no buildings (it would be illegal to build a church for the next 300 years), no political power, no social media, no printing press to mass distribute the Bible, no podcasts or Christian radio to broadcast their message, no website, no marketing department—just 120 ordinary people who believed Jesus died for their sins and rose from the dead and who had the power of the Holy Spirit moving inside of them. Apparently, that was enough, because two thousand years later, over two billion people around the world claim the name of Jesus.
5. **The power of the gospel.** Romans 1:16 tells us about the power of the gospel, and what it can do: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes." Acts shows us what happens when the gospel is preached. When the saving message of Jesus Christ, God's Son, who took on flesh, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again for our salvation, is preached, people are saved. When people are saved, the gospel changes their hearts. The chain reaction of gospel proclamation works like this: changed lives > changed families > changed schools / workplaces / neighborhoods > changed cities > changed nations > changed world. That's what the book of Acts is all about.
6. **How God uses ordinary people.** Acts is not only about miracles and the Holy Spirit and the apostles doing incredible ministry. It's about God using ordinary, everyday people. Stephen and Philip started out serving food to widows and ended up shaking cities and regions with the gospel. Mary opened her home for a prayer meeting. Barnabas not only gave generously, but he also found people that others had counted out, and he encouraged them and helped them get off the bench and step back into the game. Tabitha was known for practical acts of kindness that deeply impacted her community. Aquila and Pricilla were tentmakers by day and Bible teachers by night. Timothy was a teenager who said yes to a missionary journey that changed history. Luke was a doctor who one day put down the stethoscope and picked up pen and paper to write it all down, so that 2,000 years later, we would learn about it all. Lydia used her living room to start a church. Four sisters had a gift of prophecy that was used to uplift the church. The heroes of Acts weren't extraordinary people with extraordinary abilities. They were ordinary people who simply said yes to God. The same is true for God's work in the world today. He's not looking for superheroes, but for ordinary people like you and me who say, "Whatever I have, Lord, it's yours. Use me for your glory."

The book of Acts is so powerful because it's not only an ancient story; it's our story. This is our history. About once a month, my three kids climb on my lap and ask to open my phone and scroll through pictures. They want to go back to vacation two years ago, a birthday five years ago, back to when Mommy and Daddy were dating and fell in love. With every picture, they want the story. Who is that person? What were they doing in that picture? What happened next? Why are my kids so intrigued? Because whether they are in the picture or not, it's *their* story. Acts is *our* story! It's the movement we are a part of today, and God has so much in store for us as we study this book together!

Let's look at the opening verses and see the way Luke kicks off this letter.

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 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. (Acts 1:1-3)

Luke begins Acts by establishing "*the connection*." Luke wants us to know that Acts is not a stand-alone book; it's volume two. He says, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven." Luke reminds Theophilus of the gospel he wrote: "I told you all that Jesus while He was physically on earth; now let me tell you about all that Jesus continued to do after he was taken into heaven."

| <u>Luke</u>                                 | <u>Acts</u>                                    |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Jesus anointed by the Spirit (Luke 3)       | Church anointed by the Spirit (Acts 2)         |
| Jesus heals a lame man (Luke 5)             | Apostles heal a lame man (Acts 3)              |
| Jesus performs exorcisms (Luke 4, 8, 9, 11) | Apostles perform exorcisms (Acts 4, 8, 16, 19) |
| Jesus raises the dead (Luke 7, 8)           | Apostles raise the dead (Acts 9, 20)           |
| Jesus arrested (Luke 22)                    | Apostles arrested (Acts 4, 28)                 |
| Jesus forgives enemies (Luke 23)            | Stephen forgives enemies (Acts 7)              |

Acts is a continuation of Luke. Eugene Peterson said, "In Acts, Luke is rewriting the story of Jesus as it is now lived by the community of Jesus." Here's the way my college professor put it: "The HE of the gospels is the WE of the book of Acts." What Jesus did, his followers continued to do!

Let's keep reading.

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. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 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." (Acts 1:4-8)

After “*the connection*” comes “*the commission*.” After Jesus rises from the dead, he gathers his disciples together and says, “Hey, just so you guys know: you can’t go anywhere or do anything right now. On your own, you can do nothing. But once I send you the Spirit, nothing will be able to stop you!” “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” (Acts 1:8). This is their commission. Let’s look at a map to understand what Jesus means by “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jerusalem was the town they were living in; Judea and Samaria were the surrounding areas, within 15-20 miles; and “the ends of the earth” means everywhere! Jesus told them to start where they were, then with their neighbors close by, then eventually everywhere!

This is the exact strategy we deploy at The Creek. Our church has eight local mission partners who are doing kingdom work here in central Indiana, preaching the gospel, loving and serving people in Jesus’ name.

- Generous Ministry—supporting people in our community with gospel-centered relief and relationships
- Elevate—serving urban youth
- LifeBridge Community—after-school mentoring
- Extended Hand—prison ministry
- Horizon House & Outreach Inc.—caring for homeless adults and youth
- Midwest Food Bank—feeding the hungry
- Shepherd Community Center—holistic poverty relief
- Unconditional—outreach to women in the adult entertainment industry

This church, in very practical and strategic, relational ways, is supporting these ministries to be a Christ-like witness in Indianapolis and central Indiana, but we also want to witness to the world!

Let me pull up a map that shows you where we are working around the world!

- New England—church planting in one of the least churched parts of our country.
- Mexico—providing Christ-centered outreach, education, and community development.
- Cambodia—rescuing children who are victims of sex trafficking; providing housing, schooling, and life-skills; facilitating successful reintegration into society.
- Myanmar—supporting campus ministry and church planting.
- India—caring for orphans and widows; providing medical care for the sick; supporting a Bible college that trains pastors; supporting dozens of church plants.
- Zambia—providing gospel-centered care for orphans and foster children.
- Kenya—building and running schools in the third largest slum in the world; supporting church planting.
- Liberia—training pastors and planting churches.
- Sierra Leone—funding a school for the blind.
- Eastern Europe—providing theological training for pastors.
- Japan—supporting numerous church plants in metropolitan areas that have millions of people, but less than 1% Christians; helping many people hear the gospel for the first time in their lives.
- North Africa—planting churches; translating the Bible into a language that God’s word has never been translated into, in a closed country where imprisonment and torture of Christians is still happening to this day.

Jesus told his followers then, and his followers today, we are to witness to him in our homes, in our region, and around the world, and that is the very thing we are striving to do. When you give to support the ministry of The Creek, this is what your dollars are going toward!

Luke tells us that after Jesus gave the commission, a more critical event occurred.

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “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.” (Acts 1:9-11)

This is one of the most important but also one of the least talked about components of Christian theology: the ascension. Jesus rose from the dead, spent forty days appearing roughly a dozen different times to hundreds of different people, proving that he was alive, eating with people, restoring those who had fallen, giving instructions to his disciples, and then, after those forty days, he ascended into heaven.

As Christians, we focus a lot on Jesus’ incarnation, Jesus’ crucifixion, and Jesus’ resurrection—and we should. These are all important and essential to understanding God and salvation. But we often neglect the final stage in Jesus’ redemptive work, his ascension. Here are seven reasons the ascension of Jesus is so important.

| <u>What Jesus’ Ascension means:</u> | <u>What Jesus’ Ascension means for you:</u>      |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Completed His work                  | Your sins are fully paid for.                    |
| Enthroned as King                   | Your King is reigning over every crisis.         |
| Became High Priest                  | Your Advocate is praying for you right now.      |
| Sent the Holy Spirit                | Your Helper lives inside you.                    |
| Exalted His humanity                | Your future resurrection body is guaranteed.     |
| Prepared a place                    | Your eternal home is secure.                     |
| Promised to return                  | Your King is coming back to make all things new! |

That is how the book of Acts kicks off: Jesus exalted to heaven, reigning over the universe, ministering to us still, and active in the world for his Father’s glory and the redemption of humanity.