

Final Instructions
Acts 1: 1-8

Rev. Philip Parker
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May is graduation month. Preschoolers graduate from kindergarten, twelfth graders graduate from high school and lots of people graduate from colleges and universities. In almost every instance they wear a graduation outfit that has come to be known as a cap and gown. Have you ever wondered why graduates get all dressed up in these outfits, usually a black robe and a funny looking hat that's flat on the top? Here's why. Caps and gowns originated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Europe. They were worn by both students and professors in their colleges and universities. Buildings were unheated, drafty and cold. So everybody wore gowns, just a fancy name for a robe, in order to stay warm. But how about those caps that people wear at graduation? They are reminiscent of what master craftsmen used during the Middle Ages. Building a cathedral required a lot of mortar and it was carried on four sided pieces of wood known as mortar boards. To wear a mortar board meant that you had been instrumental in building something of great importance, a profession or vocation that would make our world a better place in which to live.

So let us appreciate and congratulate all of those who wear their caps and gowns at graduation. Those caps and gowns mark an important milestone in the lives of those who are wearing them. They are also a reminder of what usually takes place when all of those graduates gather for their graduation ceremonies. Either before or right after the diplomas are handed out, an inspirational speaker gives a commencement address. Often this person, especially at large colleges and universities, is a well-known and respected individual. Usually, this speaker seeks to prepare the graduates for the challenges and opportunities that await them in the future.

Jesus, of course, did not ask His disciples to put on caps and gowns. Nevertheless, He was preparing them for the future. In the first eleven verses of the book of Acts, we are given a snapshot of what He said. Now that might seem like a strange place to find a description of Jesus' final instructions to His disciples. But not really. Luke wrote two books in the New Testament, the gospel which bears his name and the book of Acts, the history of the early church. The first eight verses in the book of Acts serve as a bridge between the events which took place after Jesus' resurrection and before His ascension into heaven. So let's take a look at this passage of Scripture. What we will discover is that Jesus, like a commencement speaker, was sharing a message of hope and encouragement that would impact the lives of His disciples as well as our own lives in today's world.

Luke begins by giving us some background information in the first three verses of chapter one. He informs us that he is writing to Theophilus, the same person to whom he addressed the Gospel of Luke. Who was this person? Some commentators believe that Theophilus was an acquaintance of Luke, perhaps someone of high standing in the Roman government. Others believe that Luke was addressing all who were attracted to Christianity since the word means "friend of God." In any case, Luke is writing to tell this person or persons that Christ appeared to His followers after His resurrection, providing proof beyond a shadow of a doubt that He was alive. During a period of forty days He spoke to them about the kingdom of God

and told them to stay in Jerusalem until they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. It is very similar to what we find in verses 36-49 in the final chapter of the Gospel of Luke.

Luke also shares another incident which took place during those forty days. In the fourth verse of chapter one in the book of Acts, the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, are You now going to restore the kingdom of Israel?" They were still hoping that the influence and prestige of the Jewish people would somehow be restored. It would be like a return to the days of David and Solomon. They did not understand that God had something even more wonderful in store for them. So this is what He said to them, "Don't worry about future dates and times that have been established by My heavenly Father's authority. They are not for you to know. But when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you are going to be blessed with more spiritual power than you have ever imagined. That power will enable you to be My witnesses. You will tell others about Me both in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and believe it or not to the ends of earth." These words were the last that Jesus shared with His disciples before He departed from them into heaven.

Now what does this passage of Scripture in Acts have to say to us? What impact should it have upon our lives in the twenty-first century? First, Jesus did not leave His followers in a lurch after His resurrection. He did not say, "I'm out of here boys. Best wishes, I hope everything goes well for you in the days to come." Instead He spent time with them, meeting them on numerous occasions. In verse four, Luke even says that Jesus ate with the disciples occasionally. It is a claim repeated in his gospel, chapter 24, verses 36-43. In order to prove that He really was alive, Jesus asked the disciples to see His crucifixion wounds and to actually touch Him. He wanted to prove to them that He was not an ephemeral ghost, without form or substance. He was a real person who could sit down and have dinner with them. He even asked for something to eat and consumed a piece of boiled fish in their presence (Luke 24:41-42). For the disciples, the resurrection was something beyond their wildest imagination. It took a while for the truth of what had happened to sink in. The disciples were thrilled to see Jesus again, but proof of the reality which they were experiencing had to be offered and Jesus was willing to provide it. The same is true for us. What Luke said both in his gospel and once again in the book of Acts, is a testimony to the reality of Christ's resurrection. If you will remember, Luke was not Jewish. He was a Gentile, trained in the best medical practices of the Greek world at that day and time. It was his duty and responsibility to give an accurate and detailed account of what took place after Jesus was resurrected based upon eyewitness accounts of what had transpired. The resurrection was a real event that actually took place, not just wishful thinking.

The second thing that this passage of Scripture tells us is that the disciples acquired a new name after Christ's resurrection. In verse two of that first chapter in the book of Acts, the disciples are now identified as apostles. What does that word mean? The word means "one who is sent out with a special message, one who has been commissioned to deliver important information." The time of training and preparation was now over. The disciples were no longer just students, attempting to learn everything that they needed to know. Soon they would experience a marvelous graduation experience. They would be empowered by the Holy Spirit, the same indwelling presence of God that had been perfectly expressed throughout the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. It was like the realization which a student receives when they realize that they have arrived at a new station and status in life. The same is also true for us as Christians. Yes, we are still students, disciples of Christ, but we have a new calling as well. Like those first apostles, we too have a story to tell of the ways in which our relationship with Christ has impacted our lives.

This brings me to that third point. As Jesus' followers we need, indeed we must be about the business of fulfilling those final instructions that He gave to us. The resurrected Christ told those first apostles, "You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). That message, however, was not for them alone. We may not encounter Christ in the same way that Peter and James and John and the others did after the resurrection. But when we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior, we also receive the same promise that He gave to them, the promise of being filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the presence and power of God at work in our lives. When the Spirit of God delivers us and saves us from our sins, He also grants us and, indeed, commissions us to tell others about Him. We become His witnesses, His apostles, those who can testify as to what He has done for us and what He can do for others.

In closing I am reminded of a young African student who became a zealous follower of Christ. He continued to ask his instructor at a small Christian college in southern Africa about the possibility of sharing his new found faith with others. Finally, after numerous requests for a missionary assignment, the professor relented, "All right, if you are so determined to be an apostle for Christ, start by being a witness for Jesus on that work train that comes in and out of the mines each day." The young man took his assignment seriously and prayed about the best way to succeed in his new assignment. He knew that those who rode in the last car of the train were constantly fearful that it would come off the tracks. That seemed like a good place to begin, since the miners were already concerned about their safety and fearful of being injured or losing their lives. So each day he rode in the last car telling those on board about Jesus. They were amazed that this young man was not fearful. Gradually some of them began to sense that there was something wonderfully unusual about this young rider. He was a Christian who was unafraid to share his faith in Christ. Some of those riders became Christians and after basic instructions were told to go and share their faith with their fellow miners in the other cars. In time the work train was transformed into a "Gospel Express," where miners were being saved and growing in their faith. That young man took those final instructions of Jesus seriously. He started in his Jerusalem, that rickety old car at the end of the train and worked his way all the way up to the engine, the ends of his earthly assignment.

Jesus gave His followers some final instructions, instructions that were meant not only for them, but for all of God's people. Like that young man in Africa, let's find our "gospel train" and hop on board.