**The Making Of A Movement | *To Be Continued…***

Congrats to all the teachers, students, and parents on a great *back-to-school* week. I hope you had a great summer; for the first time ever, I took a whole month off, to enjoy some family adventure and much needed down-time. But as September returns life to a more typical *back-to-school* pace and structure, like many of you, I find myself also in a *back-to-church* season. To be clear, I don’t just mean back to *attending* church on *Sundays*, but to a *lifestyle* of *being* the church, of serving those in need, of community-building, of investing in the next generation, and growing God’s kingdom here in Niagara, just as it is in heaven. I hope this can be a time for all of us to get back to the place where *being the church* is core to our identity.

Personally, I’m feeling extra-excited *this* fall, because we’ve sensed God inviting us to go *back to school* on what it means to *get* *back to being the church*. Over the last few years, on top of having to dig our way out of a global health crisis, we’ve been forced to navigate what has felt like crisis after crisis after crisis. Much of our collective energy has been spent on things that, while *necessary*, aren’t necessarily the bullseye of what it means to *be the church*; a bullseye that’s been further clouded by contrasting and sometimes conflicting ideas on what the church *is*. For some, it’s a religious box to check; for others, it’s about having all the right beliefs. For some, it’s a set of programs and products to consume; a place to move on from if the grass is greener down the road. For some, it’s about doing life with like-minded individuals, promoting certain political values, or keeping our kids out of trouble. Still for many, it’s about securing an eternal destination. These distortions have led many who are *into Jesus* to opt out of *the church*. And I get it! That’s why, as we launch into this next season *(knowing there will still be behind-the-scenes work as we navigate and negotiate our differences)* we want to refocus our collective energy and attention on the bullseye of what Jesus died and rose to invite us into: to be co-participants in the miraculous, day-to-day, life-giving, faith-building, hope-realizing, love-fueling, community-transforming, earth-shattering, eternity-altering work of *being the church*.

*But how exactly do we do that?* In the spirit of *going back to school on what it means to get back to being the church*, I invite you to open your textbooks to The Book of Acts, or *The Acts of The Apostles*. *Acts* comes after the gospels – *the four biographies of Jesus written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John* – and was written by the same person who wrote The Gospel of Luke. Though Luke wasn’t one of Jesus’ 12 disciples, he played a profound role in documenting the life of Jesus. As a physician, Luke writes with surgical precision, researching and stitching together eye-witness accounts and firsthand experiences into a compelling testimony to the life and teaching of Jesus. Luke actually describes his process in the first sentences of his gospel:

***“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”***

The Gospel of Luke 1:1-4

Luke is writing to *Theophilus*, a name meaning *God-Lover*, which some have speculated may be a generic term for all God-loving people, not an actual person. Others have speculated that Luke was Theophilus’ runaway slave, but after hearing about Jesus, he freed Luke and financed his research and writing. We can only guess as to the identity of who Luke was writing *to*, but what’s clear is who he’s writing *about*. Luke wants Theophilus, and all God-loving people, to know the truth about Jesus, what he actually *said* and *did*. While Luke’s gopel details Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection, his second book – *The Acts of The Apostles* – picks up where his gospel leaves off, like a sequel; a sort of *Gospel of Luke: Part Two*. Listen to how it begins:

***“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teachuntil the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.”*** (The Acts of The Apostles 1:1-2)

Notice how Luke describes his *first* book as being about *“all that Jesus began to do and teach”*. He’s saying that everything he’d previously written about Jesus – *his birth, life, teaching and miracles, even his sacrificial death and surprising resurrection, all the way up to the point where he went back heaven* – was just the *beginning* of the story of Jesus, merely the *start* of what he came to do and teach. Luke’s point is that the work of Jesus wasn’t finished, that there was still more to do and say, that what had looked like the conclusion of Jesus’ life was, like so many 80’s sitcoms, *To Be Continued!* The Book of Acts isn’t the story of what came *after* Jesus; it’s the story of how Jesus *continued* to live and work through the church. Frankly, rather than *The Acts of The Apostles*, we should call it *The Acts of Jesus through The Apostles*, because Acts is not about what Peter, Paul, or any other apostles did; but what Jesus did through them. Luke is providing us with a key insight into what it means to be the church, and even if you get little else out of today, I want you to appreciate that the church is not a building, a program, or event you attend. It’s not a box to check, or the place you go to get all the answers. It’s not a political party, a way to spiritually bubble-wrap your kids, or a stairway to heaven. And it’s not just the collective efforts of a few well-meaning staff and volunteers. The Church is the continuation of the life and ministry of Jesus, a work that began in a stable 2,000 years ago, and continues to this day. We the church, standing on the shoulders of two millennia of Jesus-followers before us, are the living, breathing embodiment and extension of Jesus; that’s why we call the church *The Body of Christ*. We are the hands and feet through which Jesus exists in the world today.

After reminding Theophilus of the *main character*, Luke introduces the main *message*:

***“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.”*** (The Acts of The Apostles 1:3)

You know how most shows these days begin with a recap of previous episodes? That’s what this is. Luke’s gospel had already described Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, but the resurrection is so central to the story of Acts that Luke adds a flashback to the *“many convincing proofs”* that Jesus was alive.See, Jesus didn’t just appear in a fever-dream to a few devoted fans and followers; he spent forty days interacting with and speaking to hundreds of people. The Apostle Paul wrote that after Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared first to the disciples and,

***“After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters***

***at the same time, most of whom are still living…”***
(1 Corinthians 15:6)

Five hundred people saw Jesus alive at one time, and the point that most of them were still alive was that you could go talk to those who were *there*. This wasn’t fan fiction, a rumour, hoax, or conspiracy meant to fool people into joining a new religion, *one no one would’ve been foolish enough to join if they weren’t fully convinced that something game-changing had happened.* What had *happened* was the *resurrection*! And because Jesus was (and *is*) alive, the kingdom of heaven has broken into our world, reality itself has been altered, the order of the cosmos has been upended, and death is no longer the end. That’s the message of Acts: that the resurrection is *real* and changes *everything*. Jesus’ resurrection was the spark that ignited a movement that would spread like wildfire across the whole world. If the resurrection was the spark, the arrival of The Holy Spirit was the jet fuel that really got things going. Luke continues,

**“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.’** (The Acts of The Apostles 1:4-5)

 If *Jesus* is Acts’ *main character*, and *the resurrection* is its core *message*, Luke reveals that *The Holy Spirit* is the *means* by which this movement became possible. In two weeks, we’re going to devote an entire message to this, but I want us to appreciate that God’s plan for the church from the start was not simply to be a monument or shrine to an event that happened 2,000 years ago, as amazing as the resurrection of Jesus was. God’s plan was for resurrection to be an experience shared by all of us, as our limp and lifeless bodies are plunged into and fully submerged (or *baptized*) in the Spirit of God, and the presence of the risen Jesus comes to reside within us, filling and fueling us with power beyond our own capacity, that we might also come back to life, as if reborn from the dead to be a brand-new humanity. As Paul later wrote:

***“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because ofhis Spirit who lives in you.”***
(Romans 8:11)

*The same resurrection power lives in us!* Now, as Jesus instructs the disciples to go to Jerusalem to wait for The Spirit to come, they being to wonder what else might be coming.

**“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.’”**(The Acts of The Apostles 1:6-8)

The disciples, still thinking too small, wonder if Jesus is now finally going to help Israel overthrow Rome and establish itself once-and-for-all as the dominant world power. But Jesus explains that the kingdom he’s launching is not one of political or nationalistic interests, but a *heavenly* kingdom meant for *all* people, first for the people in Jerusalem, yes, but extending also to their enemies in Judea & Samaria, even to the ends of the earth. That’s how Luke structures the Book of Acts: the first 8 chapters tell the story of how the resurrection of Jesus spread like wildfire throughout *Jerusalem*, where only weeks earlier Jesus had been crucified. The next few chapters show how the message of Jesus spread beyond Jerusalem to the hostile regions of *Judea* and *Samaria*. Finally, the rest of Acts shows how this unlikely movement spread all the way to Rome, the capital of the then-known world, infiltrating the palace of Caesar himself. There, right under Caesar’s nose, the message of Jesus goes out boldly and unhindered in every direction, causing the church’s enemies to accuse them of ***“turning the world upside down!”*** (Acts 17:6) – *which is exactly what Jesus intended*. This is the story of how Jesus, a nobody from nowhere who emerged for 3 short years until being executed by the Roman Empire as a failed revolutionary, became a global movement, permeating every aspect of human existence for thousands of years to come. It’s the story of all Jesus *continued to do;* the story of *The Church*.

This *Intro-to-Acts* passage concludes with one final scene:

**“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.*’”***(The Acts of The Apostles 1:9-11)

Having produced hundreds of eye-witnesses to his resurrection, Jesus disappears before their very eyes in what is admittedly a pretty strange story. Are we to believe that Jesus literally floated up to heaven? *(Stick with me!)* Whatever it looked like to those who were present, it’s important to know that no first century Jewish person or Christian believed that heaven was *up*, in the sense that, if you shot a rocket far enough into space, you could hit it. Biblically, *Heaven* is a parallel reality or realm that exists alongside *Earth*, the spiritual counterpart to our material world. *In the beginning*, *Genesis* describes creation as a ***“heaven and earth”*** reality (Gen 1:1), and *The Book of* *Revelation* ends as God creates ***“a new heaven and a new earth”*** (Rev 21:1). Heaven & Earth, *Biblically*, exist together as twin halves of one reality, designed to coincide and cooperate, appearing at times and in certain places to almost overlap and be in sync with each other, which is why Jesus taught us to pray that God’s kingdom would come, ***“on earth as it is in heaven.”*** (Matt 6:10) It’s why Jesus began his ministry by saying ***“the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*** (Matt 4:17) Heaven isn’t primarily meant to be thought of as the good place we go when we die; but as the closer-than-you-realize place where God oversees the creation project and from where Jesus influences the human story. Theologian N.T. Wright describes heaven as *“the control room of earth”*. So, what’s all this about Jesus floating up into the clouds?

Well, if you’re more familiar with the Old Testament part of The Bible, you might recall this image from a vision described centuries earlier by the prophet Daniel. Daniel wrote:

***“In my vision at night, I looked and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”*** (Daniel 7:13-14)

This is a prophetic vision of the coming Messiah ascending to God’s throne as the eternal King of the Heaven-Earth reality. Whether Daniel foresaw this event, or Jesus is intentionally re-enacting Daniel’s vision, or Luke is simply using an old prophetic image to describe it, this scene describes the *enthronement* of Jesus over the whole cosmos: heaven, earth, everything. It’s not about Jesus floating up to the sky, but ascending to the throne of God, having fulfilled the work of defeating sin, death, and evil by the power of his resurrection, Jesus is now taking his rightful place in heaven’s *control room*, from where he will now continue to live, work, and do ministry through his new earthly body, the church. The disciples, however, are so mesmerized that they just keep staring off into the cloud, as if in a trance. So, God sends two angels to remind them of Jesus’ instructions, telling them to *stop cloud-gazing* and *get to work*. The reminder that Jesus will return is an often-repeated theme in Luke’s writings, where *the return of the master* is meant to inspire fruitful, productive labour on behalf of king and kingdom.

This is what *The Book of Acts* is all about and, frankly, it’s what the *being the church* is all about. Because Jesus is on the throne, right now, continuing to will and work to bring earth into alignment with heaven, and that work is something he intends to do through *us*. Not *near* us, not *for* us, not *around* us, not *despite* us, but *through* us; through normal, everyday, flawed and imperfect people like you and me. Not one day when we die, or when he comes back, not just on Sunday mornings, or just through paid staff, but every moment of every day, through every single one of us, together. *That’s the church!* Imperfect as we are, the church is God’s Plan A and there is no Plan B. When you consider the bigness of the work of bringing God’s kingdom of hope, healing, love, peace, and justice to a world in such disrepair, when you consider that God has bet all of heaven’s chips on *us*, you begin to realize that there’s no time for *cloud-gazing*, to just stare off into the fog of our failures, the mist of our mistakes, the haze of our hurts or the clouds of confusion, to be distracted from focusing on our mission of *being the church*, Christ’s earthly body, God’s new humanity. This is the invitation of The Book of Acts; to let the acts of Jesus – *his action and activity* – flow in and through us; to come together and by the power of the Holy Spirit be the Jesus this world so desperately needs. That’s what we at Southridge are committed to this fall, this year, and God-helping us, with the rest of our one-and-only lives.

And if you’re interested in joining us, in *going back to school* with us *on what it means to get back to being the church*, if you want to be part of the continuation of *all that Jesus began to do and teach*, then I invite you to consider 3 action steps:

First, I invite you to take some basic *back-to-church* steps, like making it a priority to gather with us regularly on Sundays, plugging into community by joining a Life Group, and participating in your local Anchor Cause, letting Jesus flow through your time, your talents, and your finances to help us be a better church, and to let each of those three primary programs, and all of them together, propel you into a Jesus-shaped life of love.

Second, recognizing a sequel isn’t the best place to start a story, I want us to all go back and read through Luke’s *first* book – *The Gospel of Luke* – a chapter a day, on our own. We’ve printed a reading plan onto bookmarks to help you follow along. Whether it’s your *fiftieth*- or first-time reading Luke, I want you to prayerfully consider, as you read about all that Jesus *began to do and teach*, how these stories might forecast the ways He wants to *continue* to live and work through *us*. As you read how Jesus *began* to heal the sick, consider how he wants to *continue* to bring healing to a broken world through us. As you see Jesus *begin* to feed the hungry, consider how he might *continue* to meet people’s practical needs through us. As you watch how Jesus *began* to include the outsiders of *his* day,consider how Jesus wants to *continue* extending that same kind of welcome and belonging to undervalued and mistreated folks in our community. As you’re moved by how Jesus *began* to practice love and forgiveness, even to his enemies, even while they were still hurting him, consider how Jesus wants to extended that same grace to the people who’ve hurt us. And as you see Jesus lay down his life in humble sacrifice at the cross, imagine how the way of the cross might become *our* way of life, as well, praying that what Jesus *began to do and teach* will be continued through lives like ours.

The third thing I want to invite us to do together, right here and now, in the minutes that remain, is receive communion. As the band and servers come forward and prepare to lead us, I invite you to consider this 2,000-year-old practice, originated by Jesus as part of what he began to do and teach, that reminds us of how Jesus wants to inhabit our bodies and infuse His life into us, as we eat this bread and drink this cup. The bread represents his body, which was broken for us, and the juice represents his blood which was poured out sacrificially for us. When we eat and drink in this way, it’s as if the very life of Jesus comes into us, metabolizing into our own bodies, absorbing into our very being, uniting us inseparably with Christ. As we all eat from the same loaf and drink from the same cup, it unites us with each other as well, as we become the body of Christ. *Jesus, as we receive you in this way, may your life be continued through us.*