

*Renewal Not Restoration*

Acts 1:6–14

Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: *May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable, even pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our strength and redeemer. Amen.*

If Jesus were here today and you could ask him one question, what would it be?

Would you ask about your future? Would you ask what would happen to you and your loved one after you die? Or a theological question: Why is there so much suffering and evil in the world?

In Acts chapter one, the disciples didn't hold back. After the resurrection, they gathered around Jesus and asked: **“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”**

We can understand why they asked.

For generations, Israel had lived under foreign occupation. First, the Assyrians. Then the Babylonians, and then the Persians. In Jesus' time, the Romans. Rome imposed heavy taxes, ruled with military violence, and political oppression. The disciples had watched Jesus die at the hands of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea.

Now Jesus was alive again. They had to be thinking: *This is it.* Jesus is alive. Surely Jesus would now overthrow the Romans. He would restore Israel's national glory.

In other words, they're asking: “When will things go back to the way they were supposed to be?”

Two thousand years later, we find ourselves asking the same thing: "Lord, can the church ever return to its *glory days* of packed pews and Sunday School full of little children? When will Christianity regain its social prestige? When will things feel like they used to?

We often romanticize the past. A past where Christian institutions carried more cultural weight.

And honestly, many of us love to reminisce about those wonderful days. It's easy to feel nostalgic.

There was a time—not that long ago—when church attendance in America was much higher than it is today. In the years after World War II, churches were full. Sanctuaries were crowded. Sunday school classrooms overflowed. Church membership grew rapidly, and faith played a far more visible role in public life.

And there was also a time when pastors and religious leaders carried enormous social influence. In early America, the clergy were often among the most educated people in town. The pulpit shaped public opinion, moral values, and even community life.

Even into the mid-twentieth century, pastors were often seen as trusted civic leaders—respected in ways similar to judges, doctors, or educators.

So yes, it's understandable that many Christians look back and wonder: "Will those days ever return?"

But Jesus does not indulge nostalgia. He does not give the disciples a political strategy. He does not hand them a timeline. He doesn't say, "Give me a few more days, and I'll overthrow the Roman Empire.

Instead, Jesus changes the conversation. He says: "*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses...*"

In other words: quit chasing yesterday. Stop looking backward. Instead, start looking forward to a life of witness and service.

The disciples want control over history. Jesus gives them a mission in the present. They want to know when God will fix everything. Jesus tells them to become witnesses, starting right where they are in Jerusalem and then going to the ends of the earth.

That may be exactly what the church needs to hear right now. We spend so much energy worrying about things we cannot control. We worry about the country, the church, our children, our future, and the world they'll inherit.

We ask: What will happen to this world?

Those concerns are valid. But sometimes they become a way of avoiding the question Jesus is asking us: *Will you be faithful right now? Will you tell the truth right now? Will you serve right now? Will you love right now?*

The disciples wanted national restoration. Jesus gave them a global mission. We want a church restoration. Jesus wants the church renewed. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” That would have shocked the disciples. Jerusalem made sense. Judea made sense.

But Samaria? The very neighbors they were taught to avoid? And then the ends of the earth? But Jesus was reminding them that God’s kingdom was bigger than their tribe. Beyond nationalism. Beyond tribal identity. Beyond revenge.

And following Jesus would not be safe. Because being a witness sounds nice until you remember where witnesses often end up.

The Greek word used here for “witness” is *martys*—the root of our word *martyr*. It means a “one who testifies,” someone who tells the truth. And truth-telling often threatens powerful people.

The disciples would stand before religious leaders. They would stand before Roman officials. They would face prison, persecution, and death.

Why?

Because empires always prefer comfortable lies over inconvenient truths. Rome called itself a bringer of peace. But the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace, was peace through conquest. Peace through domination.

Jesus, on the other hand, offers the world a different kind of peace. The kind of peace that’s achieved not through fear, but love. Not by domination, but service. Not through violence, but sacrifice. New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan reminds us that this kind of peace is peace through justice.

And Jesus calls us to embody that same witness today. Not a life of prestige, but service. Not cultural dominance, but faithfulness. Not chasing influence, but loving our neighbors.

Maybe that's good news for churches like ours that feel smaller, weaker, or less powerful than they once were. Our future may not depend on reclaiming influence. It may depend on reclaiming faithfulness to our mission. It may not be about fame or prestige, but about standing with those the world forgets: the marginalized and the oppressed. Maybe God is less interested in restoring our former glory than renewing our present witness.

Our passage in Acts says that after Jesus answers the disciples' question, he ascends into heaven. After his ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem. And what do they do? They pray. Together. Men and women. A small, vulnerable community waiting for the Spirit. No political influence. No military power. No wealth. No buildings. No institutional prestige.

And yet God used that tiny praying community to change the world.

The question is not: "When will things return to the way they used to be?" The question is: Will we tell the truth? Will we serve our neighbors? Will we bear witness to Jesus in our own Jerusalem?

It's natural to look back with nostalgia, but Jesus is pointing us forward. He is calling us out of the past and into our neighborhoods. The Spirit is still moving. God is still renewing the church. The world is waiting, and we are exactly the people God has chosen for this moment.

Let us go in hope and confidence, knowing that in our service and our love, we are fulfilling Jesus' word:

*"You will be my witnesses."* Thanks be to God. Amen.