

THE MISSION

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Luke 24:44-53

June 1, 2025

Acts 1:1-11

It is no secret that "Mission Impossible – The Final Reckoning" is in movie theaters right now. Advertisements like this **(picture)** have been everywhere, so I am going to assume that all of you have seen something of its advertising in the last couple of weeks. The action pact movie, the eighth and supposedly last movie in the almost 30-year franchise starring Tom Cruise as Ethan Hunt, was released on May 22. Did any of you run out to a theater this past week and see it?

I know it dates me, but I think I might be more familiar with the old "Mission Impossible" TV series that ran for seven seasons, from 1966-73, and which I remember watching at least a couple of the later seasons. The series starred Peter Graves as Jim Phelps, the team leader of secret government agents known as the Impossible Missions Force. I know the movie franchise is based on that old series, and Tom Cruises character Ethan Hunt is the protegee of Jim Phelps. If you have seen either the TV series or any of the movies then you know the familiar music (can you hear it in your head?) and you also know that in the opening scene the Impossible Missions Force leader receives a recording that explains a very dangerous and complex mission. After the explanation of the mission there are concluding statements that begin with "Should you decide or choose to accept this mission..." and then end with the words, "good luck." After that, the recording self-destructs, and then the rest of the story is about carrying out the mission.

On Ascension Sunday, which is today, our focus is the mission. In today's lesson from the Book of Acts, Jesus lays out for his disciples the mission he wants them to accept and accomplish. The actual time frame is 40 days after the resurrection, however, the disciples are sounding a bit like they did before Jesus' death. They ask, "**Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?**" (Acts 1:6). They are hopeful that the time is coming very soon when Jesus will triumph over his enemies and take control of the world. They've been to the cross and didn't much like it, but then there was the resurrection which had proven to them that Jesus had even more power than they had realized. They knew with that kind of power nothing could stop Jesus, so once again, they are practically tasting the sweetness of the victory that they were convinced was coming soon.

But like usual, Jesus has different thoughts about their future mission as his disciples. He says to them, "**You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth**" (Acts 1:8). Their mission is to be Jesus' witnesses - not his warriors, not his cabinet, not his think-tank, but his witnesses. And then just as suddenly as those recordings in the

Mission Impossible self-destruct, Jesus ascends into heaven, leaving all those disciples looking up in shock.

Here at the end of the season of Easter, our Lord gives us a clear mission statement. In the Gospel of Matthew, the mission is presented as a command, but here in Acts it's more like a prediction: **"You will be my witnesses!"** It's as though Jesus is looking into the future and can see what's going to happen when the Holy Spirit comes upon them on the day of Pentecost. And so with confidence Jesus says, **"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).**

Certainly, we have all seen witnesses on TV court dramas – perhaps a few of you have seen them in real life when you sat on a jury. When a witness takes the stand, it's not the personality or the physical attributes of a witness that are most important. It doesn't matter whether the witness is short or tall, male or female, young or old. What matters, and the mission of the witness is to tell what he or she has seen or heard and knows to be true – "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God."

The truth is essential for a court witness. The truth is also essential for all who accept the mission to bear witness to the Lord, Jesus Christ. The urgency of our great mission was made clear to those first disciples by two mysterious men in white robes who appeared and said, **"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" (Acts 1:11).** In other words, get your heads out of the clouds. Yes, Jesus will someday return but stop looking up and start looking around. You've got a job to do, a mission to fulfill. There are people who need to know what you have seen and heard and know to be true. There are people who need to know God's love and experience God's grace. There are hurting and hungry, homeless and hopeless people close to home and on the other side of the world who need help and hope.

The great theologian Karl Barth was fond of saying that the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is mainly the difference between someone who knows and someone who does not yet know that Jesus Christ is Lord. Non-Christians are not necessarily worse people than Christians. Honestly, some non-Christians are nicer and easier to get along with than some Christians. But non-Christians are simply people who do not yet know. Witnesses are those to whom something has happened and who then tell others about their personal experience. Today, am I not looking upon those who have personally experienced the loving, redeeming and compelling presence of Jesus Christ? As witnesses, we reveal through both our words and our actions a Savior who changed our life, who has changed other lives, and who is not done changing lives.

Let's consider for a moment when we are most like the church of Jesus Christ. It's not necessarily when we add new members, although I am certainly excited about our confirmands becoming members next week. Growth does tend to be a good indicator, and the church in the book of Acts was a growing church. There are those who think the church is most like the church when it is fulfilling the needs of its members. And yet no matter how important it is to each one of us to have a place where we can marry, bury, fellowship, learn, worship and

celebrate the sacraments, that's not the mission. The church is most fully the church, and we are most fully disciples of Jesus Christ when we are carrying out the mission – when we are bearing witness through word and deed to the Risen Christ.

Many of us have heard it, the screech of brakes, and the crash of metal on metal. Someone on the scene turns just in time to see it. Following the accident, a police officer asks, "Would you be willing to testify as a witness?" There is hesitation as the individual considers, "Do I really want to get involved?" "All you have to do is tell what you saw and heard," says the officer. But the thing is many don't want to get involved. People drive away from accidents, walk away from those who are hurt, close windows so as not to hear someone crying out for help, fail to speak up when a friend says or does something hurtful to another, and look away from one who needs help that we can give. Is being a witness for Christ sometimes inconvenient, uncomfortable, and even risky? Certainly! To follow Jesus is about carrying a cross, and doing so is always costly.

Being a witness is about telling others what you have seen and heard and know to be true about Jesus Christ. Being a witness is about followers becoming leaders, listeners becoming sharers, hearers becoming doers, converts becoming missionaries, and the healed becoming healers. Of course, we don't do it on our own – it is the power of the Holy Spirit that enables followers of Jesus Christ to be effective witnesses. It's not a question, but a factual statement. **"YOU will be my witnesses," says Jesus.** You will be my witnesses here in this church, and out in the streets of Chagrin Falls and in the greater Cleveland area. You will be my witnesses in your homes, as well as where you work and shop and eat and go to school. You will be my witnesses in the hills of Appalachia, in the tornado impacted areas of the Midwest, in the fire devastated areas of the US west and Canada, in the cities and struggling rural areas of this country as well as the villages and towns of countries like Guatemala, Zimbabwe, and Ukraine...

So, your mission today and every day is to be a witness in word and through action to the Lord, Jesus Christ! And as part of your preparation for that mission, our Lord invites you to eat and drink, to be nourished and strengthened by his Spirit through the sacrament of Holy Communion. So come, no matter your age or membership status, you are all invited to know the Lord's presence and to accept the mission. Let us prepare ourselves as we now join together in our prayer of confession...

