

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Power Here Below

Luke 24:44-53

For those of you who were at this year's Easter sunrise service, we've come a long way since that windy—to put it mildly—morning on the hill at Mount Aventine. And for those of you who were here later that morning for our 11:00 AM worship service, you too may have fading recollections of our resurrection celebration. Since then, we've tried to extend our joy across several Sundays by focusing on resurrection themes, especially through our sermons. That includes today's text from Luke, in which Jesus appears again to his disciples, blesses them, and ascends to the heavenly realm.

With Easter Sunday now six weeks behind us, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that within Luke's witness, the ascension of Jesus takes place on Easter. In fact, Luke records two ascensions, one on Easter day and one forty days later. So in Luke's narrative, the ascension not only closes the period of Jesus' earthly ministry but also opens the period of the church's mission. This link between the mission of Jesus up to this point, and the ongoing mission of Jesus in the life of the community of his followers, is critical. Luke continues the story in the book of Acts, where he unfolds the story of the church's expanding witness in the world.

But even before we get to the story in the book of Acts, Luke is already signaling to us the key to the future spread of God's word, namely, God's power. After opening the disciples' minds to the testimony of Scripture, Jesus says, "You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (vv. 48-49).

Power from on high. Luke will soon show us that this power comes in the form of the Holy Spirit, the fulfillment of the Father's promise. In other words, what the church needs more than anything else is power, the energizing life of Jesus himself, God's presence, operating in and through God's people. Power from on high, at work here below.

We're no strangers to the exercise of power in this present world. This morning, we've gathered for worship in a church sitting alongside a road that leads into what many regard as the most powerful city on earth, Washington, DC. And though our daily lives here in southern Maryland may seem far removed from those corridors of influence and decision-making, we still live within the realm of our capital city's policies, programs, and projects. Some of you work for, or have retired from, the government. You have been, or still are, participants in implementing the authority entrusted to our national departments and agencies. So every day, whether employed by the government or not, our lives are shaped, more than we often realize, by power from on high.

That's the way power often works. It makes its way from the top down. Your supervisor at work gives you a deadline for that project you're completing. Your commanding officer instructs you to prepare your unit for an upcoming exercise. Your parents tell you to help with the household chores. Your coach assigns you to a particular position on the team.

Your case's judge issues a ruling in your favor. When we think of power, we often think of hierarchy. Who reports to whom? Who gets a say in the outcome? Who makes the final decision? Where does the buck stop?

Years ago, when I was serving in my first church, I answered a knock at the door, and the person got right down to business. "Hello," he said. "I'd like to speak to the person in charge here at the church." I paused for a moment to think that one over. "Well, I'm the pastor," I replied, knowing that being "in charge" is something that's spread out among the congregation and not just confined to myself, especially in Baptist circles.

Though it was never explicitly stated, one of the topics underlying his question and my answer was the subject of power. Power isn't something that we talk about a lot in the church, though it's always there in a multitude of different situations and forms. The fact is, we're often uncomfortable with the whole subject of power. Sometimes it's because we don't think that power is really an appropriate topic within a community of Christians, or that it doesn't really apply very much to life in the fellowship of Jesus' followers.

In his book, *Playing God*, Andy Crouch tells about a friend who was speaking with a megachurch pastor whose name would be instantly recognizable in the world of evangelical Christianity. Crouch's friend asked, "How do you handle the power that comes with your role as senior pastor?" "Oh," he replied, "power is not a problem at our church. We are all servant leaders here." Crouch comments that while this pastor's commitment to servant leadership is certainly genuine, his answer doesn't fully acknowledge the power that comes with his role. Crouch writes, "I have been in rooms when he walked in and have felt the palpable change of atmosphere, as if someone had abruptly turned down the thermostat and shut off the background music. He is indeed a servant leader, but he is also a person with power."¹

Jesus did say that once his disciples had spent an appropriate period of time waiting, God would send what he had promised, and they would get a new garment, the Holy Spirit, divine power that would equip them for their kingdom of God mission in the world. In this way, we can see the flowchart of God's reign taking shape. Through Jesus, God authorizes the disciples, who will go out and testify to what God has done to redeem his people and bless the world. This means that God's sovereignty is global, and that the church is given power to extend the good news of Jesus to all people.

But the way that the church wears its God-given garment called the Holy Spirit means that power in the life of God's people will look different from the way that power is often exercised in the world. Yet sadly, it often doesn't. As one person has put it:

As church people, we sometimes assume that we are immune to the temptations of power. We don't make much money. Society gives us so little power that we think ambition—the drive to succeed, achieve and have prestige and influence over others—is a problem only for people in business or politics, not for people like us.

We thus sometimes fail to see how we get caught up, for the very noblest of reasons, in the same ambitions that motivate everybody. Eventually, the people climbing to the top of the body of Christ can look just like those scrambling to the top of General Motors.²

Many times, power gets turned into a form of dominating others, including others in the life of the church. Power gets used to protect a place of privilege or to raise one's status. It becomes a means of elevating ourselves and exalting ourselves. By contrast, from a Christian standpoint, power is to be used to serve others, to love others, and to help ensure their flourishing.

Last Sunday, our church's denominational body, the Southern Baptist Convention, made public a report from a third-party investigation demonstrating how leaders of the denomination have failed to deal with issues of sexual abuse, mainly to protect the institution from liability. The report lays out allegations of deception, stonewalling, and cover-ups. It details how denominational leaders treated sexual abuse survivors as enemies and tried to downplay the number of sexual abuse cases in our churches. It describes how calls to reform were resisted or silenced. Among other things, the report tells a story of how some of the most vulnerable, especially women and children, were mistreated by others in positions of power. It's a sobering and disturbing picture of how power can get used, in the life of the church, in ways that bring harm and injury, rather than life and flourishing, to others.

And yet, we who profess to be followers of the crucified and risen Lord are called to a very different understanding of power. In a TED Talk a few years ago, Pope Francis captured some of the potential danger of power misused. He said:

The more powerful you are, the more your actions will have an impact on people, the more responsible you are to act humbly. If you don't, your power will ruin you, and you will ruin the other. There is a saying in Argentina: "Power is like drinking gin on an empty stomach." You feel dizzy, you get drunk, you lose your balance, and you will end up hurting yourself and those around you, if you don't connect your power with humility and tenderness. Through [Christ-like] humility and concrete love, on the other hand, power—the highest, the strongest one—becomes a service, a force for good.³

Through Christ, God has given us himself, his very personal presence, at work in our lives. We've received the Holy Spirit. We've been clothed with power from on high. But how do we use and exercise this power, especially in the life of the church? What does this power from on high look like in our life together as a congregation? As one commentator has laid out the options, "Is it power over? Is it power to? Or is it power with?" He goes on to emphasize that the third option is most in keeping with the work of the Holy Spirit. "It is," he says, "the power to witness together."⁴

The power from on high that we receive into our life as Grace Baptist Church is "power with." It's power shared with everyone in the congregation, not power confined just to myself or to our church's other leaders, though we certainly have our measure of authority. It's power distributed among you, the people who make up the fellowship of believers. It's power shared among men and women. It's power shared across distinctions in race or ethnicity. It's power shared among individuals of different age groups and generations. This power from on high isn't power to dominate or mistreat one another, but power to sacrifice for one another, to serve one another, and to build one another up in Christ. This is power used in ways that strengthen, rather than weaken, our witness in the world.

Years ago, Bethany and I were on our way home from the church. We were talking about how the church works. She asked, "Daddy, are you the one who runs the church?" Being a good Baptist and knowing that the local congregation governs its own affairs, I answered, "No, honey, I don't actually run the church. The people in the congregation run the church." Then I tried to get even more theologically correct. I said, "Actually, Bethany, the best way to put it is that God runs the church. God is in charge of our congregation." "No," she said with firmness and conviction, "I mean somebody down here on earth."

We are the recipients of power from on high, lived out here below, where Jesus is still on mission through the life of the church. May the Holy Spirit continue to guide our

congregation in the ways that we practice the life-giving power entrusted to us for the spread of the gospel in God's world.

¹ Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013) 10.

² *The Christian Century* (February 24, 1988). Quoted in *Christianity Today* (Vol. 33, No. 11).

³ Pope Francis, "Why the Only Future Worth Building Includes Everyone," TED Talk (April 2017).

⁴ Osvaldo Vena. Commentary on Luke 24:44-53. Working Preacher. May 10, 2018. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ascension-of-our-lord/commentary-on-luke-2444-53-6> (May 26, 2022).