

**Immerse: The Spirit Sends Us**  
Acts 1:1-8, 28:28-31

Have you ever run in a relay race? I am a remarkably slow runner, so my relay experiences were not very encouraging. Or exciting. The US women's 4x100 relay team has been the world's best. They won the gold medal at the 2012 Olympics in London. Then at the 2016 Olympics in Brazil they were back to defend their position. The key to relays, of course, is the handoff. You have to run fast, and not foul anyone, but the critical part is a clean transfer of the baton from one runner to the next. The best relay teams really are set apart by their ability to pass the baton quickly and smoothly—without even breaking stride. During the qualifying heat at the 2016 Olympics the unthinkable happened to the US team—the second runner, Allyson Felix, was finishing her sprint and as she stuck out her hand to pass the baton to English Gardner, she stumbled. In hopes of saving the race she flipped the baton back to Gardner. Unfortunately, it hit Gardner and fell to the track. Disaster! Gardner kept her composure and picked up the baton and ran on, so the team wasn't disqualified, but too much time was lost and the US team did not finish high enough to make the final. No matter how fast you run, if you don't grab the baton the race is lost.

This fall we are taking a whirlwind tour of the New Testament. Many of you are reading along in Immerse. You are all welcome to join in, there is lots more to experience! We started with the Gospel of Luke and now are continuing with Dr. Luke's second book—the Acts of Apostles. Acts is about the passing of a baton. It is a critical point in the story of the Bible. What happens? Does the baton get passed cleanly?

One of the things we are learning through Immerse is that the Bible tells us one big story. It is a story that climaxes and centers on Jesus. But that story doesn't end at the cross or on Easter morning—no, the Bible story continues on to its great conclusion, where God rights all wrongs. But wait---I'm getting ahead of the story. At the beginning of the book of Acts God's story is at a critical juncture. God has come to earth in the person of Jesus. We read about that in Luke. Jesus, God in the flesh, came and announced that God's Kingdom, God's

loving rule was coming to earth. He embodied that good news. It is amazing to think that God—the creator of everything—was here as a human being, isn't it? But now, at the start of Acts, the risen Jesus is leaving. He is returning to the Father. So what happens now? What will happen to this story of Jesus after Jesus leaves? Jesus is passing the baton of his Good News message on to his followers. Will they pick it up and run with it?

Jesus' followers had been seeing the risen Jesus during the 40 days after Easter and he taught them about the Kingdom of God. The cross didn't cancel out Jesus' good news message. No! Easter *proves* the truth of that good news about God's kingdom. Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of God's renewal of all things—in it we see God defeating death and turning the very worst thing anyone could do—killing Jesus—into the way we are rescued from our mess.

Jesus always taught about God's Kingdom coming—that is the heart of the good news. The disciples ask, is it happening now? Is the kingdom here? But really what they are wondering about is their OWN kingdoms! We get our agendas mixed up with God's agenda very easily. Jesus tells them not to worry about the timing—instead he gives them a job to do. He tells them to pick up the baton and run with it. Jesus says---you will tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. He says you will be my witnesses. Witnesses tell people what they know. What they have seen and heard. That is our job too—to be witnesses to what Jesus has done for you. Witnesses don't have to argue the case—they just say what they know. We don't have to have all the answers when we share with someone about Jesus. But you are the world's foremost expert on your experience with Jesus. No one knows more than you about the ways you've experienced Jesus.

The Acts of the Apostles tells some of the story of those early followers of Jesus. People we call the Apostles. The word apostle means sent one. Apostles are sent out with a message. With a job to do. Those first followers were sent out by Jesus to be his witnesses. That is what makes them apostles. We are also sent out with the same charge—go and tell people about Jesus. Be his witnesses. We are apostles too. Those first followers had to take and run with the baton, but that is true of every generation. If Jesus' good news message is going to reach people today, we have to share it. It is just as important for us to take the baton as it was for those first apostles.

As you think about how we can carry out Jesus' command, think about those first apostles. This was a tiny group! We know that there were 11 disciples and some other followers around—probably less than one hundred people all together! Jesus basically handed the baton off to a group smaller than our congregation! And he expects us to go—he sends us—to be his witnesses and share his good news. Can you imagine if we were that first group of followers? Would there be people learning about Jesus all over the world 2000 years later? Those first followers were a rag tag bunch. You all look very good compared to them! You are better educated, more traveled, you have higher social status. And yet—look at what even that group did! As you read through Acts there are six sections and each one ends the same way—with Luke telling us that God's message was spreading and new people were believing the message. Over and over again the Good News was moving out and changing lives. Just like today.

How did they pull that off? How could that tiny, uneducated, bunch of country folk actually go and carry Jesus' message? They had help. They had help. Jesus didn't just give them a job to do, he gave them *the power* to do it. And he gives us that power too! Jesus said that you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. You see, Jesus didn't just rely on those followers to carry the baton—God's Spirit was sent with them to help them do that job. That word for power is dynamis—that is the same word that we get our word – dynamite! From. This is explosive power. Big power. Power that clears the way. Power that moves big obstacles out of our path. God's power is with you when you are on mission with God. Holy Spirit power is with you when you are on mission with God. When you are following Jesus and being his witness, you'll have help! Jesus reassured his followers—even if you get taken before the court or the rulers, don't worry about what you'll say, the Holy Spirit will teach you right then what you need to say.

I wonder how many of you have experienced something like that? Sometimes when I'm talking with someone, I'll say something and then wonder "where did that come from?" Where did that idea come from? When we are on God's mission we are cooperating with him and he'll help us. Of course, the Holy Spirit works in the listeners as well as in the speakers. Sometimes people will tell me about something I said that was really helpful to them. And I'm thinking—

did I say that? God is at work all through all of us, drawing us towards His good news. Helping us to work for his Kingdom.

The dropped baton was not the end of the story for the 2016 women's relay team. The team appealed because Allyson Felix had been jostled by one of the Brazilian runners who was stepping in to grab the baton for her team. That is what interrupted the handoff and caused Allyson to stumble. Incredibly, the US team was given another chance. The women ran their qualifying heat again—on an empty track, in front of an almost empty stadium. Everything went smoothly and they qualified. In the final there were no mix ups with the baton and the US won easily. Allyson Felix won her 6<sup>th</sup> gold medal and her 9<sup>th</sup> Olympic medal---tying her as the most decorated woman in track and field.

The US team—even though they were the defending gold medal winners—weren't able to win that gold on their own. They needed some help. They had to win their appeal from the judges or they would not have been able to even run in the final. In the same way—we need outside help to be able to run the race Jesus sets out for us. We can't do much on our own power—but with God's power, with the dynamite of the Holy Spirit at work, God can do anything through us. If this were a Baptist church this is where people would say amen! God can do anything through us—when we let him work. When we are open to his Spirit's leading. Amen? But like the Women's team—we still have to run the race. We can't win if we don't run.

I told you that this book is called the Acts of the Apostles—the acts of the sent ones. Some people say it should really be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. All through Acts we see this partnership between people faithfully following Jesus and God's Holy Spirit at work in and through them to accomplish God's mission. Jesus left the earth, but he sent his Spirit. And that Spirit can live in each one of us. There is not just one Jesus someplace on earth—instead we get God's Spirit at work in believers all over the world. Jesus leaving and the Spirit coming is a huge benefit for us. Do you remember in Star Wars when Darth Vader fought Obi Wan, Obi Wan warned him—if you strike me down, I'll become more powerful than you can possibly imagine. Most great stories are echoes of the TRUE story of God. We are always looking for that true story that we can enter into through the Bible. Obi Wan's warning is only a pale and weak echo of the powerful effect of the cross. Evil thought it had won at the cross—people had literally

killed God. They rejected God in the most final way possible. But evil was wrong. God rose up more powerful than ever before—and now people were empowered to have God’s spirit live in them. Empowered to have God to act through them. For God’s mission to spread to the ends of the earth. Our world is discouraging in all kinds of ways. This week, this month, this YEAR—its been hard and it seems to be getting tougher. But evil does not have the last word. God is at work. God’s Spirit is active in the world. Take heart because Jesus has overcome the world!

At the end of Acts we see Paul, under house arrest in Rome. About half of Acts is about Paul, who had persecuted the early believers—until he met Jesus and was filled with God’s Spirit. We’ll hear more from Paul in the next few weeks. Paul personally lived out Jesus’ commission—he was a witness for Jesus from Jerusalem, up into modern day Turkey, then all through Greece and finally in Rome, the heart of the empire. This is like the ends of the earth. Anything that becomes important in Rome spreads out to the whole empire. And that is just what we see happened with the spread of our faith. Once Jesus’ witnesses were telling their story in Rome—in the power of God’s spirit—the good news of Jesus spread and spread. Jesus’ commission to his followers was well underway. The baton had been passed.

Luke ends his story this way: Paul announces that God’s salvation is not just for one people but has been sent to everyone. Paul welcomed all who came to him—proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ freely and without hindrance. That is how the book ends—the message spreading without hindrance. Paul is telling people about God’s kingdom arriving through Jesus. He is being Jesus’ witness clear across the sea.

Luke ends here. He doesn’t tell us what happened to Paul—who was under arrest awaiting trial before Caesar! But he ends with the most important thing: the Good News of Jesus is being proclaimed without hindrance. That is the point. When Jesus sent out that tattered bunch of followers to be his witnesses there were lots of hindrances—lots of obstacles to getting his good news proclaimed all over. But with the dynamite power of God’s Spirit—those followers, as well as the followers who came after like Paul—were able to truly be sent apostles and to proclaim the kingdom of God, even right into Rome. The obstacles were cleared away.

That is still our job today. And we still get the help of the Holy Spirit to clear the way. But we have to run the race. Friends—you are sent ones. It is our turn to take the baton and run. You are Apostles sent by Jesus to join in his mission in the world. We can't just sit here—we need to reach out. Reach out to our loved ones. Reach out to our neighbors. Reach out in love at work and school. God has placed each of you right where you are to be his witnesses. He has put this congregation right here, right now and he is giving us that same mission. Go. Be Jesus' witnesses. In Salt Lake, in Sandy, through the Wasatch Front and to the ends of the earth!

Let's pray:

Dear Jesus—we are humbled by your call. It scares us, if we are honest. How can we do that? Not me! Thank you for not sending us alone. Thank you for these friends you have gathered around us to go with us, and thank you especially for your Spirit living in us and empowering us. Lord—we open ourselves anew to your Spirit. Come Lord—live us. Move in us. Make us brave for you and be with us as we show your love this week. In Jesus' name we ask it, Amen!