

Don't Be Surprised, Be Faithful, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. x7050508
Acts 1:6-14 and 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11
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Come with me away from the horns, sirens, train whistles and booming bass audio systems of the city to a mountain, where it is peaceful and quiet. You can see the city far across the valley, but you don't have to worry today about your business or your house or your children. Hear the wind gently blowing through the leaves of the trees and the birds chirping their songs of spring. It is good to be here. It is relaxing and refreshing.

The Lord has invited you to this place. He has some things to say to you. In response to your anticipation he says, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set by authority."¹ He continues, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."² You wonder what this Holy Spirit thing is. And power— power to do what? What kind of power?

He continues, "and you will be my witnesses here and to the ends of the earth."³ And just as you begin wondering what he means by all this, he is lifted up and disappears into the clouds. You are left there without him. Suddenly, everything is quiet again and you are surprised, maybe even fearful or terrified. What will life be like without him?

He has surprised you before. His invitation to follow him came as a surprise to you. When he healed that blind person, you were surprised. When he allowed himself to be arrested, you were really surprised. He was hung on a cross and pronounced dead and was buried, but the tomb was found empty, and you were surprised. You thought he was dead, but he surprised you by appearing on the road, in a living room, and at a dinner table.

Yes, today in the surprising quiet of this mountaintop, the Lord has some things to say to you: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set by authority." A few years ago, we heard a lot about the millennium. False prophets, opportunistic book writers, and bloated TV preachers have tried to scare the be-jeebers of you, saying that the end of the world is here. But they do not know; the Lord says, "it is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set by authority." You, disciple of his, are to go on about your business of caring, and teaching, and preaching, and loving. It is urgent business, as if the world were going to end tomorrow, but it is your normal business: you are his disciple.

The power of which Jesus speaks is the power to serve others— power to tell the lost and the mixed up that there is a higher purpose to living than simply making a buck. The purpose is to share God's love and make this a better place. It is a power given to you through The Holy Spirit. It is none other than God's power, and you will find yourself doing things you never thought you could do. You will be saying things you never thought you could say. You will endure hardship and pain the way you never thought you could.

The Lord says, "You will be my witnesses here and to the ends of the earth." You, disciple, are to proclaim what you know to be the truth: that power does not come from votes or salary, or cubic inches, or muscles. Power comes in witnessing to Jesus' strength of faith. Power comes by turning the other cheek, by loving your enemies, by forgiving and not holding a grudge. Power comes by knowing that God is God, and we, we are only human. Our security lies not in alarm systems or handguns, but in prayer.

¹Acts 1:7

²Acts 1:8

³Ibid.

Your life span will not be increased by working more hours, but by relaxing and enjoying the life that God has already given you. Your joy will be increased by spending your hours with your family, or with those who are lonely. It can be difficult to be a witness to God's love. Ask some ministers who are trying to change United States' policy toward Cuba by taking old used computers across the border to be shipped by boat to hospitals in Cuba. It is difficult to be a witness to God's love. Ask some nuns who were tortured, raped, and murdered for teaching peasants how to read the Bible. It is difficult to be a witness to God's love. Ask some Christian Palestinians in Israel who are harassed every time they try to go to church in Jerusalem. No, it's not easy to be a witness to God's love.

The writer of 1 Peter says, "Don't be surprised at the ordeal that is taking place to test you."⁴ Don't be surprised when people don't want to hear the good news. Have you ever tried to hug an angry child? Don't be surprised when people don't want to hear the good news.

The writer continues, "Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings."⁵ See, disciple, you have chosen to side with Christ. You will probably suffer for making such a choice, but that is reason for rejoicing. Shout for joy: you are on Christ's side! You suffer because you've chosen the right side! You are a witness to God's love.

The writer of 1 Peter is writing to a group of Christians persecuted for their faith. Whether it was Nero, Domitian or Trajan, the Roman emperor persecuted Christians for worshiping God and not worshiping him. The writer was telling these early Christians to keep the faith in the face of the persecution. So the words come to us, on the quiet of our Spring mountaintop: be faithful! Don't be surprised when people don't want to hear the good news, but be faithful and show it to them anyway.

Well, Disciple, you could get a stiff neck looking up into the cloud waiting for Jesus to return. Jesus doesn't want you to suffer from a stiff neck. Put your head back down so you can look around you— so you can see the needs of those around you. Go and minister to them in the name of Jesus Christ.

This is Ascension Sunday, the day we celebrate the end of Jesus' earthly existence. Now whether or not you can grasp a bodily assumption (Jesus was no lightweight, no fluff ball), the theology of the ascension is that Jesus, who had a human earthly existence, is no longer with us, but his perspective has changed. Jesus' perspective has changed. He no longer views reality from a tomb, or even from the earth's plane, but he sits at the right hand of God: a perspective over the affairs of earth that can give us hope and confidence. If we can believe that Jesus is looking over his followers from above, we can feel more secure. Also, we can feel more of a purpose to what we are to be about.

When we are discouraged, or depressed, it is time to look back up into the heavens through which Jesus ascended, and remember the things he said. "You must be born from above!"⁶ "I am with you always, to the close of the age."⁷ "I will never leave you orphaned."⁸ "Come to me, all you who are weary, and I will give you rest."⁹

No, don't be surprised that Jesus ascended into heaven. Don't be surprised when you suffer for witnessing to the gospel. Don't be surprised when you find people who don't want to be loved. Don't be surprised, be faithful. Love them anyway. Witness to God's love.

⁴1 Peter 4:12

⁵1 Peter 4:13

⁶John 3:3

⁷Matthew 28:20

⁸John 14:18

⁹Matthew 18:28