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Sermon 24 April 2022

Title: The Rising Church Sermon 1: Endings and Beginnings (Acts 1:1-11)

- Good morning church family—it is good to be with you this morning—whether you're joining us at our LargsNaz brunch in person or you're watching online from so many places all over the world, we hope that you are excited to be with us and the God is blessing you and you are being ministered to this morning—there are exciting things that are going to be happening here at LargsNaz, beyond what we could ask for or imagine, and if you're anything like me, I know that you are eager to see what God is going to do in the coming months. We'll be discussing that at our church board's vision meeting this coming Saturday, so please keep us in your prayers.
- Now 3 years ago, way back in 2019, we worked through a sermon series called "The Rising Church," and it was a study of the Book of Acts, and in a nutshell, that series was designed to help us learn from Luke's account of the formation and growth of the early church—to see what their experiences and insights could show us as we moved forward as a body of believers.
- And looking back now to 2019, it's really just a little bit amusing to think how naïve we all were, how we could have had no idea what we were in for over the course of the next 2 years as we were all forced to become familiar with a little thing called COVID. At the time, if someone had suggested that our little church was going to have to close its doors and move to an online format and

have meetings through ZOOM, and we'd all be locked down for weeks and months, and we wouldn't have church for 500 days and even we when could meet we couldn't sing, or we'd have to sing with facemasks—if someone had suggested all that we'd have thought they were out of their ever-loving mind—because we were excited, we had plans, we were ready to see what God had in store for Largs Church of the Nazarene—oh, it was a new day and great things were ahead.

- But the lockdown did happen, and churches everywhere did have to close their doors, and pastors had to learn how to become video editors and online technicians and social media experts, and I remember at the time when all that happened, there were those who had been predicting the demise of Christianity for some time who saw the pandemic as further proof of the obsolescence of the church—those who were convinced that many, if not most, churches would never survive this challenge—nobody was interested in church anymore and surely COVID-19 was going to be the final nail in the coffin. They said things like “once people get used to going to church online, from the comfort of their sofas, they'll never want to meet in person again.” All you folks at our worship service and our brunch are probably smiling at each other right about now because you know that wasn't entirely true-- because those prophets of doom didn't figure the power of the Holy Spirit into their equations—their prognostications depended only on human data, and predicted the results of human efforts and strategies, and the power of human influence—and one need only look at what's been happening at

Largely over the past year to realise how wrong they were—because God’s kingdom will go forward, God’s work to redeem creation, to transform lives, to restore relationships and bring peace and joy and fellowship and wholeness and healing would not and will not be hindered by anything so relatively insignificant as a global pandemic.

- And so as we emerge into a post-pandemic world, I believe that as useful and relevant as our study of the Rising Church was back in 2019, it is even more relevant in 2022.
- And so, for the next 6-weeks, right up until Pentecost Sunday, we will be taking a journey through the book called The Acts of the Apostles—and so you may hear some familiar ideas but you will also hear many new ones because we have updated the series to be pertinent not only to our post-Christian situation, but to our post-pandemic situation as well.
- But let’s begin with that first idea—you saw it in that little video that we started with--the idea that we are now living in the post-Christian world. There are all sorts of schools of thought around this idea, but most of them are based on the idea that Christianity as a whole, as a “religion,” as an institution, has lost or is losing its influence--political and cultural—in societies where it had been for a very long time the sort of default position for the majority of the population, and for the culture in general.
- Those who argue this point may say that Christendom (that’s institutional Christianity) has been or is being replaced by something like “secularism” or “nationalism” or “multiculturalism” or something like that. They may point to

declining church attendance and commitment, as the former Archbishop of Canterbury did in 2014 when he said Great Britain was a post-Christian nation, they may point to the number of churches that have become restaurants and music venues, or that have closed due to the effects of the pandemic---they point to declining numbers of people who say that they are “Christian” and increasing numbers who say they are something else, or that they have no religion at all. And of course the pandemic and the lockdown have also had an effect on church attendance—but they have also taught us that the church can still be the church even when it doesn’t meet inside the church.

- But basically this idea that we are living in the post-Christian world is based on a certain view of power. It’s based on the idea that Christendom, or Christianity, or the Church, isn’t as “powerful” as it once was—and that power, or weakness, is based on certain kinds of political and cultural influence.
- But I wonder if maybe that idea of power isn’t the only way of thinking about the power of the Church. I wonder if perhaps the Church’s power might have very little to do with political or cultural influence—that maybe those things are simply byproducts—that maybe the Church’s power, correctly understood, comes from another source entirely—and that this has always been the case, from the Church’s very beginnings—that the power of the church comes from its willingness lift up the cross of Jesus, to be filled with, and guided by, and open to, the Holy Spirit, and its willingness to be emptied

out toward the world, to share the good news—surely the 40 days of Lent taught us the power of God to renew and refresh and resurrect what is lifted up and emptied out—imagine what God has in store for us if we truly allow the power of the Spirit to flow out of the Body of Christ and to redeem the barren and broken places, to serve the lost, the last and the least

- Now if the notion of the post-Christian world is built on the idea that something is ending, then might it not also be that something is also beginning—and even as the pandemic is ending, the church has an opportunity to take part in something remarkable-- something driven by the Spirit of the living God who, as the Prophet Isaiah proclaimed (43:19), is always saying
- “See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.”
- And so these are ideas that I want you to be thinking about as we consider over the next 6 weeks what the church in the post-pandemic and post-Christian world can learn from the Church in the pre-Christian world.
- Now as I said, this series will take us right up to the last Sunday in May—that’s the Sunday before Pentecost Sunday (Pente means 50—and Pentecost is 50 days after Easter, 50 days after Passover--FIFTY)—the day of Pentecost occurs in Chapter 2 of Acts, when the Holy Spirit descends like tongues of fire upon the Apostles gathered in Jerusalem, and through the power of the Holy

Spirit they proclaim the gospel to the gathered crowd from all around the world, in the native languages of the members of the crowd. You'll remember a few weeks ago we suggested that it was that event that represented a "gathering up" of the children of God in Jerusalem --and some folks call that day the birthday of the Christian Church—and from there the church, the body of Christ, would rise just as the Body of Christ had risen on Easter morning—and so this series is called "The Rising Church"

- But today, as we start this series, we're going to start at the very beginning of the Book of Acts
- But that beginning is also an ending, as we will see
- When I was a kid, maybe 5 or 6 or 7 years old, one of my favourite shows—if not my favourite show—was Batman—now I'm talking about the REAL Batman with Adam West—did they broadcast that show here in the UK? Remember that theme song? Sing it if you know it--nananananana. . . .BATMAN—I used to tune in every week to watch the Caped Crusader and his trusty ward battle the Joker, the Riddler, the Penguin and Catwoman—now that was quality television
- But sometimes when I was watching an episode, I'd look at the clock and realize that it was getting close to the end of the show, and I'd think—there's no way they can wrap this up in time—there's only 5 minutes left—and Batman and Robin are still hanging by a thread over a tank full of man-eating sharks—

- And then it would happen—TO BE CONTINUED—tune in next time for the exciting conclusion, same Bat-time, Same Bat-channel—NOOOOO!
- And I'd have to wait all week to see how—and IF-- the Dynamic Duo were going to escape—even though I knew they would—they always did—Batman would have some shark repellent in his utility belt, or he'd use the batarang to cut the rope and swing to safety
- But always, in the next episode, the conclusion, part two, they'd begin the show with a little recap to remind you what was going on at the end of the last show—they'd say "in our last exciting episode, Batman and Robin were dangling precariously over the Joker's shark tank"—the show would begin with the end of the one before it—and that part would be both an ending and a beginning
- This is sort of what Luke is doing at the beginning of the Book of Acts—he's saying, "in our last exciting episode. . . here's where we left off"—and the last exciting episode was the Gospel of Luke, which focuses on the life and ministry of Jesus—including the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. Acts begins where the Gospel of Luke ended, with the ascension, and continues the story of what happened to Jesus' followers and the movement that became Christianity.
- The Book of Acts begins, as the gospel of Luke began, by addressing someone known as Theophilus. We learned about that back in our "Meet the Gospels" series-- Luke writes:

- In our last exciting episode. . .No-- In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying[Ⓜ] with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with[Ⓜ] the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”
- Now just very briefly, I want to remind you about Theophilus—lots of people, including John Wesley, have put forth theories about who he is—a Roman official, a member of the Alexandrian elite (John Wesley thought that), Paul’s lawyer, or a Jewish priest—but nobody really knows
- But what we do know is that the word “Theophilus” means “lover of God,” or “loved by God”—either way, that’s us, that’s any reader who fits that description
- And what I want to say about that is—it’s really helpful and important to understand the historical situation of scripture as well as well can—who wrote what, and to whom, and why, and what the historical situation was at the time—but the truth of scripture doesn’t lie solely in the historical situation—way back there---through the power of the Holy Spirit, scripture speaks to each of us, in 2022, in our own situations, in our own language—

much like the Apostles speak to the crowd at Pentecost in their own language—that's what the Holy Spirit DOES

- Now let's look at what Luke is reminding us of in his Gospel—in verse 3 he writes ³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.
- After his suffering—a central theme in the Gospel of Luke—and in all the gospels, really—is the idea that Jesus' crucifixion—his suffering—is an example of the way that God's agape love works—that God himself empties himself out in the incarnation and crucifixion—that the Son of God made himself nothing, even to death on a cross—and that this sacrificial love, this giving up of power, runs contrary to the idea of what Power is as understood by the world—a world that values military might, and shows of strength and political and cultural influence—and the disciples have a hard time understanding this—it's why they shy away from Jesus' speaking of the necessity of his suffering, and talking of his crucifixion—it is the reason that Peter, who says he loves Jesus and will never leave him, denies him not once but three times—
- And now we join the Apostles after his **suffering**, then 40 days of proving—proving what? That he is who he says he is and that is the resurrected Messiah—but Luke doesn't mention 40 days before the ascension in his gospel—why does he mention them here in the Book of ACTS? Think back to the Gospel of Luke—immediately after his baptism, Jesus spends 40 days

proving himself in the wilderness before the beginning of his ministry— that’s why Lent is 40 days long--40 days precede the ministry of Jesus, and here, 40 days precede the ministry of the Holy Spirit; what Luke is showing us here is that his gospel is the story of Jesus; while Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit

- The period of forty days is significant throughout Scripture and as a period of testing or proving – we see it not only in Jesus testing in the wilderness, but in the story of Noah, of Moses, (Deuteronomy 9:9, 18); and in the story of Elijah in First Kings (1 Kings 19:8)—Elijah—keep that name in mind.
- So Luke is recapping Episode 1 here, and connecting the gospel of LUKE with the book of Acts—so Jesus has suffered, been resurrected, and has spent 40 days with the Apostles speaking about the Kingdom of God—what’s he been saying? Well, you might imagine he’s been saying the kinds of things he said throughout the Gospel of Luke—like the things he said in the Sermon on the Plain—Love your enemies, give to anyone who asks you, do more than the sinners around you—sacrifice everything, give your all, knowing that the Father will provide for you—that’s what the KOG is all about
- And the disciples have been with Jesus all through the Gospel of Luke, and for 40 days after the resurrection, so you’d THINK that they would by this time sort of “get” what Jesus’ life and death and resurrection and the Kingdom of God is all about—but you’d be wrong
- In verse 6, Luke has finished his recap, and begins the narrative of Acts proper—and what do they ask?

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

- Seriously? The Disciples’ interest is STILL about political aspirations—they’re still misunderstanding the concept of the Kingdom of God—we’re going to reclaim our power from the Empire and our enemies, right? Restore us to our rightful place above everyone else, right? Give us that political power—that cultural influence—make Israel great again
- Verse 6 betrays the fact that the disciples still did not understand the nature of the kingdom of God. Their political aspirations were not Jesus’ primary agenda.
- And how does Jesus respond? verse 7

⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But **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.”

- “You will receive power,” Jesus says—do you think the disciples had ANY idea what he was talking about? Any idea what was about to happen at Pentecost?
- I think they would have been full of questions—WE will receive power? What do you mean the Holy Spirit will come upon us? What does that look like?
- But their questions are going to go unanswered for now, because, in verse 9 Luke tells us:

⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

- Whoa—wait—WHAT?? And just like that, the Gospel of Luke ends and the Acts of the Apostles begins—but can you imagine their confusion and amazement? This Jesus they've left everything to follow is gone from the earth.
- Imagine the thoughts going through their heads as Jesus ascends and is gone.
- I imagine they were thinking similar thoughts to the ones they had thought when Jesus was lifted up on that cross. I imagine Peter said out loud, "Well now what??"
- You remember I told you to keep Elijah's name in mind?
- Well scholars say that there are correlations between the language and imagery here in Jesus' ascension, and the ascension of Elijah in the Old Testament (in 2 Kings chapter 2)
- Now when you first hear that you might think, sure, the correlation is that both Jesus and Elijah ascend into heaven—ok that's interesting
- But there's a little bit more than that
- If you look in 2 Kings Chapter 2, you find the story of what happens just before Elijah—who brought fire down from heaven, right?—ascends into heaven
- I'm not going to get too much into the details—but if you look at 2 Kings chapter 2, the Lord is about to take Elijah up to heaven, and Elijah tells his disciple Elisha that he has to go to another place, Bethel—and Elijah tells

Elisha “Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. 3 The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?” And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent.”

- Now this happens again, Elijah is called to Jericho—Elisha says “I’m going with you.” And folks say, “Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?” And he answers, “Yes, I know; be silent.”
- Then it happens again—to the Jordan river—Elijah tells him “Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.” But Elisha says said, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on.
- And they get to the Jordan, and Elijah takes off his mantle, and splits the Jordan, and they walk across on dry land
- And when they cross over Jordan, what do they see? Coming for to carry him home? That’s right
 - But before Elijah ascends into heaven, before that sweet chariot swings low, Elisha makes a request of him—he says “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” Elijah responds, “if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you”
 - Is this sounding familiar?
 - What’s about to happen to the disciples in Acts?
 - But notice the difference between Elisha’s request and the question of the disciples—they ask are you about to restore Israel’s political

power? But Elisha asks for the power of Elijah's SPIRIT. Are you following? Elisha's request is about power of a different kind.

- And when Elisha could no longer see Elijah, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two. He was grieving—much like the disciples—what will I do now?
- Oh, and one more thing—in verse 7 of that 2 Kings Chapter, it says: Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan.
- Fifty. Pente—like Pentecost. Because that's how scripture works—it repeats itself. We know what's coming.
- I think Luke is reminding us, remember what Elisha asked for from Elijah?
- The disciples asked Jesus when Israel's political power would be restored. But they're getting what Elisha asked for—a double portion of Jesus' Spirit after they see him ascend to heaven
- So let's return to the scene in Acts, the disciples are watching the Ascension—Jesus is rising into the heavens—Verse 10:

¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

- Now, if you don't see the humour here you're not paying attention--The angels: Why are you just standing there?
- Why do you stand there looking up? (Are these the same angels Pastor Tasha told us about last week, the ones who asked on Easter morning "why do you

look for the living among the dead?”—these angels have a little bit of an attitude—these angels are snarky and always around to comment when folks are doing something, well, worth commenting on—

- Basically these angels are saying—what are you doing? If you’re so interested in power, go to where you’re going to receive it. Don't just stand there, do something! And so the story of the church begins.
- But aren’t we sometimes tempted to simply watch the skies? To remember what has happened and to just Wait for the Second Coming—these angels reminds us that we have other things to do—things that we are commanded to do—just as the disciples are commanded to stay in Jerusalem—to go to a specific place and stay there—
- But why a specific place at that specific time?
- Because place matters, history matters, identity matters—
- You might ask--couldn’t Pentecost have happened anywhere?
- Sure, it could--but it didn’t, God USED a specific place that played a specific role in the lives and histories of the Apostles and those to whom they would witness—
- and the same is true today—God uses **-creatively—**the specific story and history and identity of churches **and the people within them** in ways that **only** they are suited to. . .
- Do you hear the message for us today?
- What Largs Nazarene does and will do is different from what happens in Ardrossan, or Parkhead, or Perth-- what works for them may or may not

work for us, what is right for their community may not be right for ours—but miraculously, we are all part of the same mission—we are unified in our diversity—and like the Apostles on Pentecost, the way we spread the gospel will be determined by the needs of the communities we serve

- As we'll talk about at tonight's Second Helping and throughout this series, God uses our unique personalities, our experiences, and our gifts—God takes the way we act and the way we communicate, the way we are, and the things we have done, the things we can do--and makes it all new—God makes us more ourselves than we have ever been before—but that's not all—the Holy Spirit gives each of us unique and individualized gifts that enable us to serve others and to follow the path that God has called us to—toward a destination that is beyond what we could ask or even imagine
- Like the Apostles on their WAY to Pentecost that we've looked at this morning, we, both as individuals and as the church, really don't have any idea what to expect from the coming days and weeks and months and years as we leave the past behind us, but we can be sure that the Holy Spirit is going to do all we will allow and be open to, and powerful things are only just beginning.