

“The Story Continues...With Us”

Do you have a favorite movie sequel? That's the question I asked a few members of our staff here at the church a few days ago. Do you want to hear their answers? Well, our DCE Beth Agner said that her favorite movie sequel was *Toy Story II*. That's a good choice, I think, because it's one of the rare sequels that is as good as the original. How about our receptionist, Carlin O'Brien? Her favorite is the 1982 American musical classic, *Grease II*. Another good choice- I haven't seen it but it does have excellent on-line reviews. Jan McClusky, our bookkeeper's favorite is *Madagascar II*. Shannon Janosko, our Parish Administrator, went with the classic followup to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. DCE Krista Young took a different approach. She went with the yet to be released sequel to *Finding Nemo*, *Finding Dori*. She just knows it will be her favorite. How about Steve Ebberts, our facilities manager? He went with the highly criticized *CaddyShack II*, which should have gone straight to DVD. Amy Elder, our Communications Coordinator, went with the very funny *Grown-Ups II* - excellent choice, at least in my book. And Billie Kay Roland, our Track Out Director, Pastor Puls and Pastor Wagner all had the same answer. Can you guess what it was? It's the 1980 follow-up to *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, which is my favorite as well.

Sequels can either be really good or really bad, can't they? Of course there are a few predicting factors that can be used to gauge potential success. The first is that the first movie has to be good. People generally won't pay good money to see a follow-up to a bad movie. Another is the introduction of new and interesting characters. *The Empire Strikes Back* has both of these. *Star Wars* was a good movie; of course people wanted more. And remember that is was in the *Empire Strikes Back* where we were introduced to the new characters "Yoda" and "Lando Calrissian." Successful sequels build on the original and inspire us.

Today in our Bible reading from Acts, we don't have a mythical tale of a young Jedi, we met in an earlier book, training under the Master Yoda while his friends are being pursued by Darth Vader. But we do have, in a very real sense, a sequel. Here's what I mean. Our text in Acts 1:1-11, are the opening verses of the second book written by

Luke to a man named Theophilus. Listen to verse 1 again. "In my first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up." You liked my first book Theo? Well, here's the sequel.

That first book was of course Luke's Gospel where he described in great detail the life of Jesus. But Luke didn't leave us hanging by ending his story shortly after Jesus' resurrection from the grave. No, he gave us a sequel and it is the story of how the risen and ascended Christ continued to act through the Apostles and ultimately acts through you and me. Think of it this way. He records the story of the Gospel- the good news that all of humanity has been saved from sin and death by the work of Christ alone and then in the next book, he gives us the story of what God's people have done with the Gospel. The two are to be understood as a unit but like most movie sequels, you kind of have to see the first one for the second one to make much sense. We need to know that Jesus death and resurrection has earned salvation for us. We need to know that instead of punishing us, like we all deserve, God punished his own Son. And because Jesus took our punishment, we are able to come before God and confess our sins with repentant hearts and know we are forgiven! We need to know the teachings of Jesus and the story of his life from Luke's first book to explain how we are part of the kingdom of God!

Because Luke assumes we know this in his second book. "He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs," Luke writes in verse 3, "appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God."

This is important because without Jesus' teachings, there is nothing for us to talk about. Without Jesus' suffering and death, who cares who this guy was? Without Jesus' resurrection, the story would be over because where is the hope in a dead guy with a good reputation?

But through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Luke got it right. In the sequel to his account of Jesus' life, that one of kind life continues. And it continues with you and me! The Ascension of our Lord may have ended Jesus' earthly ministry but as our text today clearly implies, it was anything but over.

For the disciples, Jesus appearing frequently during those 40 days after the resurrection was their motivation. Jesus is alive! And for you and me, Easter continues to be just as real. Don't think so? Well listen to this. Jesus would soon visibly leave his disciples but he makes sure his work would continue. "And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart but to wait for the promise of the Father, which he said, 'you heard from

me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5). What he meant there is the day of Pentecost where the disciples would be filled with the Holy Spirit. The day they would be given the power to proclaim everything Jesus did and taught in Luke's first book in any language on earth, as recorded in Chapter 2 of Acts. Because where the Holy Spirit is at work, Jesus' story continues.

That's how Easter continues to be so real for you and me. We've been baptized with the Holy Spirit. He, the Spirit is living in us, keeping us in the true Christian faith, sharing with us forgiveness and enabling us to do good for each other.

And it is by the Holy Spirit's power, Jesus' work and teachings continue through us! Jesus told his disciples and he tells you and me that "we will be his witnesses to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Isn't that cool? Jesus' ascension is the end of his earthly ministry but there is no ending here. The disciples acted; they told others who acted; and on and on it went, all the way to you and me.

Now we are the ones who have to act. We are the new characters, like Yoda and Lando, brought into the sequel. One of our confirmands said it so well on the video. He said, "I mean something to God and have an important role in his community." That is so true. As those baptized into Christ Jesus, we mean everything to God and we all have a role in his community. We are to be his witnesses where we are- in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our schools, in our workplaces. Because the truth is there are so many people, even in our own neighborhoods, who do not know the love of Jesus Christ and he needs us to act.

Because it all comes down to this. Where Jesus Christ is, things can't stay the same. Day after day we hear some pretty bad stuff happening in our world, our nation, even our town, don't we? But there is hope because where Jesus Christ is, things can't stay the same!

Yes, to be Christ's witness is a tough thing to do. But remember this on the day we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord. Jesus continues to be with us. "And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight," we read in verse 9. But Jesus was still with them as he is with us. Jesus took his place at the right hand of God but where that place is no one really knows. So think of that place not as some isolated hidden realm of the universe. In fact, don't think of it as a place at all. Because Jesus is with us. He's constantly exercising God's power

on our behalf- everywhere! How comforting is that? He's not in some distant place; he's with us right now. Jesus is guiding us; he's protecting us; and in the words of one of our confirmands, "he's accepting us as sinners not because he has to but because he wants to." That is a powerful message that all of us need to hear and that's the message that I know has grown this congregation of Hope over the past 18 years!

But it's not just about growing congregations. It's about the story of life. My friends, we are living in the sequel as witnesses of the Messiah, Christ Jesus our Lord. He's calling us as the members of his body to do his work. He's calling us to bring his love to our neighbors from *Hasentree* to *Heritage*; from *Tyler Run* to *Traditions*; from *Dansforth* to *Deacon's Ridge* and every community in between. Jesus is calling us and he is counting on us to continue his story.

And there's is one more chapter to this story. "This Jesus, who was taken up into heaven, will come again" as Luke records in Acts (1:11). And when he does, our story will never end. That's our promise. Until that day may we boldly live as his witnesses so that story continues for many more. In the name of our crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord. **Amen.**