

Christ Presbyterian Church

Edina, Minnesota

April 10-11, 2010

John Crosby

"{RE}LATIONAL: Restore"

Acts 2

Our church's mission is very simple. We want to, "**Inspire all generations to follow Jesus, to love others, and to live missionally.**" That's easy to learn, easy to repeat, but very difficult to live out.

For the last two years we have tried to listen to the Bible in a fresh way: the top 100 stories in the Bible last year and this year, one story, the story of Luke, who talks about Jesus. We have spent all fall and winter listening to the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, which climaxed last Sunday when Luke asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" The risen Christ! All that in the story of Luke is volume 1 because Luke actually writes two books in the Bible. Volume 1 is one of the four Gospels, Luke, Matthew, Mark, *Luke*, and John. Right after John's Gospel comes a Book called Acts. We are going to turn our eyes to Acts today and tell the story about what happens after Jesus has risen from the dead. People start to follow Him and become what they didn't call it back then but what we now call *the church*?

We are going to continue the story of Luke. So let's look back at Luke, to see if we can remember what was distinctive about Luke, and then look ahead to the Book of Acts.

There are five marks to the Gospel of Luke that make it distinct from the other stories about Jesus. I said the first of those was that Luke is a doctor. As a doctor, he is careful and thorough. Thirty percent of all the stories about Jesus are only found in Luke because he didn't want to miss a single one. He is careful with the details, talking with eyewitnesses about them.

The second mark of Luke is that he is not writing for religious people. He is *outward* focused. He is not turned inward on the church or inward on the Jewish community. Matthew and especially John are not going to be understood unless you are a Jew and you know what is going on. Luke wants to write for everybody to show that God loves not just us but everybody.

The third mark of Luke that make his stories so special are that they are unusually Jesus-y — that's a theological term I made up. They are Jesus-y because Luke wants you to know Jesus, both as a person, as a human being, and also as somebody different from whom you would expect. This is the unexpected Jesus, the Jesus who says the wrong things, touches the wrong people, brings the wrong people along with Him, and becomes a King the wrong way. It's a Jesus-y story.

The fourth mark of Luke that we don't want you to miss is that this is the story of Jesus that is filled with surprises. In this story, it is not the rich who win; it is the poor. It's not the powerful who end up on top; it's the weak. It's not the men who run the story; it's the women who become the heroes. It is called *the great reversal*. That is one of the things that makes Luke's story different.

The fifth mark of Luke's story is that his story is filled with joy. As he talks about Jesus, his story is filled with life as if it's an adventure to be enjoyed. He tells stories about a widow whose only son dies and Jesus comes along and raises him from the dead. He tells stories about a poor woman who has lost the only thing of value in her house and tears the house apart and rejoices when she finds it. Luke is the one who tells stories about a man, who stands at the door, looking for his runaway son day after day after day and finally, over the hill, his son comes back to life. Luke's stories are filled with joy. That is what makes Luke so interesting. If you want to recapture the essence of Jesus, I encourage you to reread the story of Luke.

Well, this is the week after Christ has risen from the dead and now we are on to volume 2 in Acts. Luke and Acts are joined by one common theme, a one-word theme. It's all about *salvation*. Salvation is what you have heard since the first time you came into a church. Jesus wants to save you from sins. Salvation makes it possible for you to go heaven when you die. If you believe in salvation, it's like you get a *Jesus, get-me-out-of-hell free card*.

For Luke, both in the story of Jesus and in the Book of Acts, salvation is more like somebody is sliding off the cliff. They are on a mountain at the edge of a cliff and they are sliding off. Just as they start to fall, a hand grabs them. Salvation is more like being rescued. In the Book of Acts, you are rescued from death by a hand that has you tightly held and your only decision is: Do you want to ask the other hand, "Help me! Pull me back up!" or do you want to say, "Thanks, I'd rather try it my own way." That's salvation. The way salvation is going to show in Acts has two different aspects than it did in the Gospel of Luke.

The first of those is that in Luke, the story of Jesus, the Gospel goes to all kinds of *people*, rich and poor, close and far, Jew and Greek. In Acts, the Gospel goes to all kinds of *places*. It is a story of movement and that movement of God and God's Spirit goes out in six waves.

Acts, Luke's second book is a longer work, 28 chapters. It's broken up into six waves as the church grows *missionally*. The first six chapters, up to chapter 6, verse 7, are about what God does in Jerusalem right after Jesus dies. The apostles stay there and the story is told in Jerusalem. At the end of chapter 6 in verse 7 it says, "So the Word of the Lord spread." That's the theme, the hint of what we're going on to in the next chapter. "The Word of the Lord spread."

In the second wave from Acts 6:8 to 9:31, the Gospel goes out from Jerusalem toward Egypt. The church is persecuted, people scatter, and it goes out toward Egypt. That section ends with another summary verse. It says, "The church was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit and grew in numbers." "The Word of the Lord spread." "The church grew in numbers."

The third wave continues the growth. It goes from Egypt to Antioch up north, the first place where the people in the church are called Christians, Christ-ones, Christ-followers. In this chapter, as they go toward Antioch, it ends by saying, "The Word of God continued to increase and spread." "The church grew in numbers."

Then we go on to the next wave, to Asia. Now this is not the continent of Asia with China. This is a huge province of the Roman Empire to the northeast, where Turkey is today. As the Gospel went to Asia, it says in chapter 16, “So the churches were strengthened in faith and grew in numbers,” – that same pattern, “The Word of God spread.” The church grew in numbers.” And that takes us from chapter 16 to chapter 19, where the Gospel goes to Rome, the center of the world. Paul is taken as a captive to Rome and there the Gospel is taught. Chapter 19, verse 20 says, “So the Word of the Lord spread and grew in power.”

The Gospel has gone from Jerusalem to Rome, the center of the world, and now between chapters 19 and 28, people go to the ends of the earth. The last verse in the Book of Acts says, “Boldly and without hindrance Paul preached the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.” That’s the Book of Acts, this movement of God’s Spirit and God’s people, and wherever they went, the story changed lives.

It is also a story, which you would understand from Luke, where different people are affected so I broken it down in different waves. The first wave in Acts, goes from Jesus, who is still alive, to Peter, the first disciple, to Paul. By the end of Acts, the story of the church is Paul’s story with thousands of non-Jewish believers. In the same way it goes from Jerusalem, where all the action starts, to Antioch to Rome. Then from Rome it says, “Paul goes to Spain,” the ends of the earth.

Acts tells the story of how it starts with the Jews. It goes from the Jews to what is called the God-Fearers. Here is a term that historians have developed to say, most of the people in the early church were probably God-Fearers. That is, they were not Jews themselves, but they believed in the one God, the one God of the Jews, and they have been hanging around the synagogues and the Temple, but not allowed in. These people probably formed the core of the early church. It goes from the Jews to the God-Fearers to the Gentiles.

The last shift Acts talks about is that the Gospel goes from the peasants sitting around the Sea of Galilee and the priests in Jerusalem to soldiers. The most famous conversion in the middle part of Acts is that of the Roman centurion. This is important because Roman soldiers go all over the Roman Empire. The Gospel goes from peasants and priests to Roman soldiers. And at the end of the story of Acts, the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “Greet the members of Caesar’s household for me.” It has gone from peasants and priests at the edge of the Empire to Caesar’s household.

This is the way that in one generation, God has spread the Word all over the world. In Luke, it’s all about Jesus. In the Book of Acts, it’s all about the Holy Spirit. Central to the story of Acts is the presence of God, empowering people and uniting them through His Spirit. We’re on the other side of the cross, the other side of the tomb. Jesus has said, “I have to leave so that My Spirit will be with all of you all of the time.” We are going to spend the next couple of months, looking at volume 2, and for the next five weeks, we are going to start by talking about relationships inside this new thing that people are starting to call *the church*.

That’s the end of the data dump, the end of the lecture. I hope it will give you a clear frame of where we have been and where we are going. If you would, please, take out your Bibles, the ones you’ve brought with you or the ones in the pews in front of you and turn to the Book of Acts. Find Acts, chapter 2 but do not read it. Find it but do not read it. The reason that I’m asking

you to not read along is that I'd like to offer you a different translation, Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*.

Jesus has died. He has been raised from the dead and has told His disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit. This is 50 days later. The Holy Spirit comes while they are waiting in an upper room and all of them are changed. They go out to speak to the large crowd that has gathered for the religious feast of Pentecost. When they begin to talk, everybody seems to understand in their own language. Whether I am speaking English or Swahili, everyone hears it in their own tongue. Peter, the head of the followers of Jesus, gives a long speech about what has happened to Christ and how their lives have been changed. At the very end of that speech, the church is started. This is the way his speech ends:

Peter said, "Israel, listen to this. There is no more room for doubt—God made Jesus Master and Messiah, the same one you killed on a cross." The crowd responded. It says, "Cut to the heart, those who were there listening asked Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers! Brothers! So what must we do to be saved?'" **The theme of Luke: salvation**, somebody skidding off the cliff. They are screaming out "Help!"

Peter says, "Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." **The second theme: the Spirit.** "The promise is targeted to you and your children but also to all who are far away." It must go to them, "whomever, in fact, our Master God invites." It says, Peter "went on in this vein for a long time, urging them over and over, 'Get out while you can; get out of this sick and stupid culture!' That day about 3,000 people took him at his word, were baptized and were signed up." Instant church.

They didn't even know that they had to meet next Sunday or what they were supposed to wear. Instant church. Now from that point on, it seems that God will do most of His work through the local gatherings of these followers of Jesus. It says, "They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers."

"Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met. They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in the city liked what they saw. Every day their number grew." That phrase again, "every day their number grew" as God added those who were being rescued, saved.

It seems like the purpose of the church is so that more are rescued. Does that seem like a description of the church that you are sitting in? Two thousand years later, does this feel like that same church? I would suggest, it is a lot different, and it is not because of the robes, and it is not because of the buildings. In a lot of ways, it's the difference between newlyweds and people celebrating their fiftieth anniversary. Who loves their spouse more – newlyweds or people celebrating their fiftieth anniversary? It's hard to tell. I mean, after 50 years, you can look back on all the pain and all the dreams and all the hopes and all the forgiveness, and you can say, "Wow! Look what's happened!" But when you're a newlywed, you are sure that you are inventing the whole idea of love. That was the church. They were making it up. Sometimes you

look at couples who have been together a long time and you think, “Wow!” and sometimes you look at them and think, “They’ve sort of lost their way, haven’t they? They’re just living in the same house.” They need to be reminded of what drew them together.

The week after Easter is a perfect time to be reminded of why we sit here. Because as much as I love this church, the church I just read about is the one that I want to join. That’s the one I want to be part of. What made that community special were two things.

The first was what happened in the lives of the people who bumped up against these followers of Jesus. Some of them were healed. All were forgiven. Their lives were turned upside down and they were changed. The second is that as their lives were changed, they developed a relationship with these other followers that they had never experienced before, something that everybody in the city saw and liked and said, “Oh, I want some of that.” As mentioned in the children’s sermon today, “They will know that we are Christians by our love.” People became convinced that God was *over there*. Would people become convinced that God was over there at this church because of the way that you and I care about each other?

I believe that in the end we remember the people that God uses in our lives at least as much as we remember those special *Red Sea-parted moments*. Everybody has one or two of those in their lives but what you remember are the people. This church is at its holiest when a young couple stands here and says “I will,” “I will” at a wedding because they are surrounded by people who love them. This church is at its holiest when a group of people sit here and talk about somebody whom they love who has just died. They tell stories, they comfort one another, they talk about God’s hope, and they walk out weeping together.

This church is like *that* church on Thursday mornings and Friday nights when small groups of you gather together and you have the guts to say, “This is what I’m struggling with.” “This is what I don’t understand.” “This is where I need help.” You love each other, you care for each other, you encourage each other, you pray for each other, and you study together. *That* is when God’s people become a church and, if you don’t have that, I am not sure that you have a church. You are just going to church.

I know all about that. Some of you know that I grew up Catholic and sort of went away from belief and at high school-college, came back to Christ through the middle door, through Young Life-Campus Life – a very exciting, Wow! kind of thing. During high school or college, church, frankly, seems pretty boring. They sing all these old songs. You have to get all dressed up. You don’t understand half the words. The services go too long and they are all *old* people. I understand that last part a little better than I did back then, but I did not really go to church for much of the first seven, eight, ten years that I followed Jesus. I was with my friends in Campus Life.

When I went to work in Campus Life in Boulder, Colorado I was invited to the First Presbyterian Church of Boulder. By the time I walked out after my first time there, I was a changed person. I heard an organ and flute quartet play classical music and it was like Wow! An old, bald guy, who got up and sort of stumbled to the pulpit, talked for 25 minutes about the most intellectual stuff on the planet in words that I could understand and that changed my life. Over the course of the next month, I met a small group of people and I said, “I want to be like you. Can I join you?” Until then I never knew what the church could be.

I was changed primarily because Bob, the old, bald guy who came to the pulpit, who was a Princeton University Ph.D. still had time for a 26-year-old kid. He would mentor me and encourage me and tell me truth that I did not want to hear. I still remember... we went to the Good Earth and I was trying to decide whether to go to law school or seminary. Bob leaned across the table, tapped me on the wrist, and said, "John, I know you. You become a lawyer, and you're going to become a great, Christian young man. You're going to give away lots of money but you're just going to be a lawyer. You go to seminary first and, if it doesn't work out, you'll still go to law school. I know you." That changed my life. Somebody who loved me enough to tell me what they saw inside me.

How do you get to a church like that? You came here this morning. Who are all these people? Please take out the cards and a pen or pencil. The key to the church of Jesus Christ is the people inside the doors, so what I'd like you to look at is your relational community. How is your relational community populated?

I'm going to offer you five different categories of people, five different kinds of people in your life and in our church, and ask you two things. Who is that person in my life? or Who is an example of that person? Who comes to your mind? You may find that you only have one or two of those. That is completely understandable. It gives you something to think about. I believe that unless we look at the relationships in our lives, we just sort of wander through life. If I want to change my life, I need to change my environment, I need to change my relationships.

There are five kinds of people. Three kinds of people *add* Holy Spirit power to your life. They *add* joy and meaning to your life. The other two kinds of people are either neutral or, frankly, don't help you become the kind of person that God wants you to become. Let me run through this because I want you to personalize it.

The first group of people are VRPs, what I would call **very resourceful people**. They are the *mentors*, the people who *build into* us. Who was *your* Pastor Bob, *your* Dr. Bob? Do not write down the name of your second-grade teacher. Do not write down the name of your favorite professor in college or the name of boss on the first job you ever had. Who is it *now*? If you are 72 years old, whom do you look up to? Whom do you learn from? Who is that? I've got two of those people; one of them has been dead for 50 years and the other one is an older fellow. Whom do you have in your life who is mentoring you?

This community is filled with the second group of people I would call VEPs, **very encouraging people**. If very resourceful people are your mentors, then very *encouraging* people are your teammates who share your faith, not your friends. They share your life also, but they share your faith. Whether you are in a small group or you just have casual acquaintances, very encouraging people are the ones who know you and love you and want you to be a better person. They are committed enough to you to help you do that. When you walk away from them, you feel better because you have agreed that you are going to go Feed My Starving Children. You are going to go help build a Habitat house. You are going to go tutor that kid together. You're just going to go bowling Saturday night and have a great time. They are encouraging people to you.

Just as everybody needs mentors and teammates, I believe that almost all of you need the third group of people the VTPs – **very teachable people**. If you keep learning this stuff but you don't

teach anybody, you need to find protégés. It doesn't mean a formalized thing. For many of you, you've got some of them right in your own house. They are between the ages of two and, well, in my case, 22, and in some of your cases, 32. Some of you have protégés that you are growing. Others of us need to ask, whom can I influence the way that *I* was shaped? *All* of you can do this. You're not here to become Obi-Wan Kenobi but you can love somebody and encourage them. I believe those are relationships that give us energy and give us life.

This fourth group can be rated a neutral, but I consider it as a negative because I think anything that's not helping you is actually hurting you. I believe that this church is filled with and your life is filled with what I would call VNPs, **very nice people**. They are nice people and yet in many ways, they are *neutral* people. They like to be where the party is. They want to be seen with other nice people. They dress well, they are casual, you see them sitting here, you have a sense that 30 years from now, they will still be sitting here and nothing will have changed in their lives or in your life. They will still be very nice people. That's just fine, but remember last week? Jesus did not die so that we could become very nice people. Jesus died so that we could become *dangerous* people. Very nice people, if they fill your world, are like eating popcorn. You just eat it all day, and nothing changes—except you get fat and get greasy hands. Look at the people in your lives. Are they nice? I hope they are polite but are they just nice? Do you just talk about the latest show or clothing? Do you just talk about the Masters or the latest gossip around the corner? How do they change your life?

The last group of folks here in this church and in your world, I call VDPs – **very draining people**. Gordon MacDonald, who gave me this taxonomy of people, said very draining people come in two forms. There are toxic, cynical people; they are the ones who always have the latest gossip, who never really have a good thing to say, they are reluctant to say good things but quick to criticize. If you need more paper at this point for listing those people's names, you could *be* one of those people. There are a lot of people who are like that. The other very draining type are mean people.

When I go through a crisis, I am hurting and I need the help of other people. The small group that I am in becomes all about me and my pain, all about her and her pain, all about him and that broken relationship. All of us at times are all of these people. Hear me say that again. *All of us are all of these people*. The job of the church is not to kick people off the island. It is to gather everybody together, the resourceful as well as the draining people.

You need to look at your life and see how it is populated. You need to recognize what I would call a desire for imbalance. I believe that all of us have a desire to be imbalanced relationally, and it's different for each one of you. Some of you love to be needed so you don't mind having lots of draining people around you because they make you feel like you are the savior. You are the one who can help them. You wonder why you are always exhausted. It's because these people are filling your life. Others of you come here and you like to be popular so you will make friends with a hundred people and everyone will think you are the greatest in the world but nobody will really know you. Some of you like to come here and take four pages of notes because for you, it's the idea of wisdom. That very resourceful, people-thing somehow never seems to come out of you. You always just are a student.

I believe that all of us have a desire for imbalance, to be needed or popular, wise or happy. I believe that our communities' relative health, our spiritual health, is understood by courageously

asking: Who is in my life? Who is in your life? Who is helping us grow in Christ? So let me ask, how would others assess you? Resourceful? Encouraging? Trainable? Are you nice? Are you in a draining season of life? Which of these do you want to be? Is there any wonder that a steady diet of any single relationship leaves the hungry chubby and you unchanged? Is your diet helping you become the person that God wants you to be?

It says, "They gathered daily, sharing all that they had, one with another, meeting to hear about the apostles' teaching and to worship together and to eat in each others' homes. They were a community, and those who saw them loved what they saw, and daily the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." Not because they were the cool kids in school but because God was drawing them together and they found a place to become who they had always wanted to be.

Again, I am not trying to say to you, kick the draining people off the island, kick the nice people out of the club until they want to be serious about the faith. God wants all of us here. God wants you to be developing that circle of people in your life that gives you grace, that teaches you truth, and shows you how to serve.

Paul started a church like this in Greece, one of these little communities filled with all different kinds of people, and he said, "Be careful to examine yourselves and not exclude anybody." He says this, "Brothers and sisters, remember what you were like when you were first called. Not many of you were wise by human standards or influential. Not many of noble birth, but God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise, and the weak to shame the strong, and the lowly and the despised so that no one, no one would boast in anything except the Lord." This church is not for the cool people. This church is for the broken and weird people that God draws together. In His magnificent, grace-filled way He feeds us and loves us and sends us out.

Let's pray.

Two thousand years, Lord Jesus, and we are still hearing You. We are still coming together, trying to figure out what our part in all of this, how to be forgiven again, how to learn again, how to serve again, how to give again, how to have the life that in Jesus Christ is really life. As we gather at Your table, I ask you to bring to our hearts the people who fill us and the people we need to serve. I ask You to fill the holes in our lives, whether it is with a protégé or a mentor, a teammate or someone to serve who will bring our lives into this community of life. Take this bread and this juice and turn it into the presence of Your Body and Blood, so that we might say, "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again." Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.