

# Promised Power

## **Promised Power**

Gene McAfee

Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian

Cleveland Heights, Ohio

Ascension Sunday

May 17, 2026

Texts: Luke 24:49, John 16:7, Galatians 5:1, Philippians 2:12

In the final moments before his ascension, according to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says something both mysterious and urgent to his disciples:

“And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Power.

That is the promise.

Not prestige.

Not certainty.

Not control.

Power.

And yet if we are honest, many Christians hear that word “power” and we become uneasy. We know the truth of Lord Acton’s dolorous maxim about the corrupting power of power. In the adult education class last week, we talked about the dynamic of power and oppression, a dynamic that infects Christians no less than anyone else. We have seen too much religion intoxicated with power. We have watched churches seek political domination instead of moral witness. We have seen power used to exclude, shame, silence, and wound. History gives us ample reason to be suspicious whenever religion starts talking about “power.”

But the power Jesus promises is not the power to dominate others. It is not the power of empire. It is not coercive force. It is not Caesar’s power or the power of the majority party.

It is the power to become free—spiritually free.

That is why Paul writes in Galatians:

“For freedom Christ has set us free.”

The promised power of God is the power that liberates human beings from fear, hatred, despair, conformity, and death-dealing systems. But more than this, and far trickier, the power promised us by God is the power to free ourselves from dependency upon another, even if that other is Jesus. Divine power is God’s gift to us to become fully alive.

Last week, one of you pulled from a notebook a quote from Howard Thurman that I included in my sermon series on Thurman a while back, and it was a quote from his baccalaureate address at Spelman College in 1980:

*“There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will, all your life, spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.”*

The genuine that Thurman is referring to is the Spirit of the Divine, the Holy Spirit, the Advocate that Jesus promised his followers. And perhaps that is why Jesus says something astonishing in John’s Gospel:

“It is to your advantage that I go away.”

Imagine hearing that as one of the disciples.

How could it possibly be better for Jesus to leave?

Surely the movement would be stronger if Jesus remained physically present—teaching, healing, organizing, comforting, confronting, correcting.

But Jesus understands something the disciples do not yet understand: if they become dependent upon his physical presence, they will never discover the Spirit’s presence within themselves.

As long as Jesus remains beside them, they will look outward for authority, courage, wisdom, and strength. But once he ascends, they will have to discover that the life of God has already been planted within them.

That’s what Paul was trying to tell the Galatians. The way they were interacting with their religious teachings—the law, as we commonly call it—was keeping them dependent in an inappropriate way. It’s a temptation for every religious person. It is always tempting to look to our tradition—our religious culture, and that “culture” matters—for all our answers. And that constant referral to something “out there” keeps us from growing “in here.”

And that's why Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth, "Sisters and brothers, stop thinking like children. With regard to evil, be infants. But in your thinking, be adults" (1 Cor. 14:20).

The ascension is not Christ abandoning the world.

It is Christ refusing to let the disciples remain spiritually immature.

It is Jesus saying: "You must now become the body of Christ yourselves."

That is the promised power.

Not dependency.

Not passivity.

It is participation.

The church, unfortunately, has not always trusted ordinary people with that kind of spiritual dignity.

Too often religion teaches people to distrust themselves. To silence their conscience. To fear questions. To submit uncritically to authority. To imagine that holiness means becoming smaller, quieter, less human.

But the New Testament paints a very different picture.

Again, Paul, writing to the Philippians:

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

Notice what he does *not* say.

He does not say, "Sit still and let someone else do your thinking for you."

He does not say, "Wait passively for God to do for you what you could and should do for yourselves."

He says: *work out your own salvation*.

Not earn it.

Not purchase it.

But work it out—live it, embody it, struggle with it, discover it. Take off the training wheels.

Some of you may recall the PBS commercial of a few years ago of the little girl learning to write and she says, “I just practice and I just . . . just . . . figure it out.”

That’s what we all have to do with life: we practice and practice and just figure it out. With God’s help, the help of the Spirit.

The Christian life is not spiritual paralysis. It is spiritual awakening.

And awakening requires power. This kind of power:

The power to resist cynicism in a cynical age.

The power to remain tenderhearted in a brutal culture.

The power to tell the truth when lies become socially convenient.

The power to keep loving when bitterness would be easier.

The power to believe another world is possible when the world around us insists that greed, violence, and division are inevitable.

That kind of power does not come from willpower alone. It comes from the Spirit.

And that matters especially now.

We are living in an age saturated with exhaustion. People are overwhelmed by constant outrage, relentless information, political hostility, economic anxiety, ecological fear, and loneliness. Many people feel spiritually depleted before the day even begins.

Even churches can become trapped in exhaustion—anxious about survival, fearful about decline, nostalgic for a past that cannot return.

But Ascension Sunday refuses despair.

The ascension says that the crucified and risen Jesus Christ—and they come as a pair, “crucified and risen”—that Jesus Christ is not trapped in one place, one institution, one era, or one structure.

The embodied Word of God is the risen Jesus Christ who is the Spirit of love and life for all of God’s creation, and that One is loose in the world.

And that spiritual force is still moving.

Still empowering.

Still liberating.

Still calling ordinary people into extraordinary courage.

Notice that Jesus tells the disciples to wait until they are “clothed with power from on high.”

Clothed.

That is a beautiful image.

The Spirit is not merely an external tool handed to believers. The Spirit becomes something they wear, something surrounding them, shaping them, covering them, and identifying them.

Like compassion clothing cruelty.

Like courage clothing fear.

Like hope clothing despair.

The promised power of God does not erase our humanity and it does not hide it; it transforms it.

And perhaps this is where Ascension Sunday speaks most deeply to progressive Christians today.

Because many thoughtful believers have rejected distorted versions of Christianity built on fear, exclusion, certainty, nationalism, or spiritual abuse. And rightly so.

But after rejecting toxic religion, people often wonder: what remains?

Ascension Sunday answers: the Spirit remains.

The liberating presence of Christ remains.

The call to freedom remains.

The power remains.

Not power over others.

Power **for** others.

Power to heal.

Power to forgive.

Power to welcome.

Power to resist injustice.  
Power to build beloved community.  
Power to live truthfully and courageously.

And, in our historical moment, perhaps the most important power of all is the power to overcome the temptation of victimism. We are living in an age when trauma is all the rage. We are being told that we are all victims of trauma of one kind or another, and that is true.

But the Christian tradition holds that there is a greater truth, and that is that we are no longer victims. No matter what has happened to us, no matter what we have done to ourselves or to others, there is a power greater than trauma. It is the power of salvation, found in one place and one place only, and that is the place of compassion.

Not privilege.

Not conformity.

Not victimism.

Not defunding or occupying or making America great or healthy again.

Compassion.

We will be saved by compassion for all of God's beloved creation or we will not be saved at all.

That is why the ascension is not really an ending.

It is a commissioning.

It is a commissioning to stop telling ourselves and each other and the world how loving Jesus was and to start developing the kind of love he taught, embodied, lived for, died for, and was raised by.

And we have the power to do that. Every single one of us, no exceptions, has the power to love. Not as the world tells us to love—love this one, not that one, love these not those, love here not there—but as God loves. We have that power. It was promised on Ascension Day, and it was delivered on Pentecost. The Spirit transformed frightened followers into people capable of changing the world. And not only were they capable of it, they actually did it.

And the same Spirit is still at work now.

In congregations that choose compassion over fear.

In parents teaching children kindness in an unkind world.

In communities protecting vulnerable neighbors.

In people recovering the courage to hope again after grief.

In every act of resistance against dehumanization.

In every refusal to surrender to hatred.

In every confrontation with unjust systems masquerading as the best of all possible governments.

The promised power is already moving among us.

Not always dramatically.

Not always loudly.

Often quietly.

Like yeast in dough.

Like breath in lungs.

Like fire beneath embers.

And perhaps the greatest misunderstanding about spiritual power is that we think power always looks spectacular.

But the Spirit's power often appears in profoundly ordinary forms:

The courage to begin again.

The decision to forgive.

The strength to tell the truth.

The willingness to remain openhearted after disappointment.

The determination to keep working for justice even when progress feels painfully slow.

That, too, is holy power.

So on this Ascension Sunday, perhaps the question is not whether God still gives power.

The question is whether we are willing to receive it.

Whether we are willing to trust that the crucified and risen Jesus Christ has not abandoned the world.

Whether we are willing to believe that the Spirit is already at work within us.

Whether we are willing to live as free people—people free to love God's world as God loves it.

“For freedom Christ has set us free.”

And therefore, church, do not live as though fear has the final word.

Do not live as though cruelty is inevitable.

Do not live as though hope is naïve.

We have been promised power.

And the Spirit of the risen Christ is still clothing ordinary people, like us, with extraordinary grace.

We conclude our worship by singing together hymn 637, “O Sing to the Lord.”