

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: June 30, 2013  
Sermon Title: Field of Flags  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Acts 1:1-11

## **Acts 1:1-11**

*In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While 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; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'*

*So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But 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.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards 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.'*

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People always ask how sermons come about, and most of the time the subjects come easily. This week was tougher. When you look out the window you see 6,700 American flags, 6,700 individual flags, 6,700 men and women who have been killed on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq. It is hard to ignore that — that reality, that image, that sacrifice, that sorrow. It is right there, which is exactly why we did it. To remember.

I was telling a friend how our "Field of Flags" came about, and he suggested it is worth retelling to the whole church. On 9/11 we all knew by 10 or 11 o'clock that morning that we were at war. It was probably the same at Pearl Harbor, that right in the middle of the carnage, everybody knew peace was over and that war had begun. Here at our church we resolved that throughout this war, whomever it was against, however long it took, we would use our church as a place for unity; we would not be divided; that our sanctuary would truly be a sanctuary, a place of peace, a place of remembrance, a place of hope. The politics of war would be out there, let it be argued in Congress, on talk radio. In here, we would not let politics divide us.

To help that we brought together about 15 veterans from all the way back to World War II, Korea, Viet Nam. And they were unanimous. We didn't need to bring the church together for or against the war, for or against a policy or a political party. All we needed was to be sure that we stood together with our soldiers, never forgetting them, always remembering, reaching out to them, listening to them, embracing them.

That led us to send mountains of care packages to soldiers on duty. We had many returned soldiers speak to youth and adults. And when the number of dead reached 1,000, we had a memorial service right here in the sanctuary and did it again when we reached 2,000.

As the war went on, and the numbers grew, we kept up the care packages, we kept up the prayers, and we added "The Field of Flags." Now, let me confess, my plan was very simple: I had no plan at all! I figured I'd get a few flags, and after church each person would take a flag and stick it in the ground in front of the church — that was it! Presto!! "Field of Flags." Fortunately, many of you stepped forward, overruled me, and came up with a plan that was dignified, beautiful, and powerful.

That's our "Field of Flags," but I still wasn't sure what to do with this Sunday. Or this sermon! July 4<sup>th</sup> is Thursday, so should today be our July 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday, or should it be next Sunday? Then again, July 14<sup>th</sup> is our annual church picnic out on the lawn, surrounded by the flags — red, white, and blue theme everywhere — maybe that Sunday should highlight nation, flag, soldier, and sacrifice? Or a little bit each Sunday?

I realized I was overthinking it, and that took me back to our Scripture for today, the very opening verses of the Book of Acts. St. Luke is the author of Acts. He was a convert to Christianity, a doctor, a travelling companion to St. Paul on the great missionary work of the early church. Luke starts off by reminding everybody that he's already written his biography of Jesus, "the

Gospel of Luke." So he's not re-doing that. Now he's going to tell us "the Acts of the Apostles." He's going to explain about how Christianity grew from a person and an idea to a religion. But first, he had to close the book on Jesus, so he takes us to Jesus's final moments on earth.

All of Jesus's followers, his "believers," gathered with him one last time for final instructions, and those were BIG instructions! He told them to tell his story from one end of the world to the other, from "Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth." Then, St. Luke writes, "Jesus was taken up into the clouds before their very eyes." *Ascension*. And he was gone.

Then comes a very funny verse, very human, very poignant. All of Jesus's followers were sort of frozen in time; they didn't move or talk, "they were just looking intently up into the sky," (Acts 1:10) the Bible says. Standing, looking, maybe numb, stunned, wondering, "Did what just happened happen?" "Where did he go?" "What do we do ... now?"

"Suddenly, two angels showed up and asked them point blank: 'Why are you standing here looking into the sky?'" (vs. 11) The implication is: standing ... looking ... doing nothing. They've just been told by the most important person to ever walk on the earth to go and do the most important assignment ever given to a group of people, and they're just standing there, mouths hanging open, question marks hanging over their heads, looking up at the sky, some already starting to disbelieve what they had just seen. Really!

Matthew's Gospel says that right there on Ascension Day, with Jesus right smack dab in the middle of them, "some doubted." (Matthew 28:17). *Some doubted*. I'm not surprised. Jesus had been brutally executed. He kept appearing and disappearing. Now he's hovering between heaven and earth, then gone.

"What was that?" some must have asked. Apparition? Hallucination? Dream? Vision? Wish fulfillment? Or, a very real, alive Jesus, the Son of God, Savior of the world, whisked off to heaven, his job on earth done, leaving the rest of the job to ... us? You and me. Who can blame them, or us, for standing around just looking? Wondering what's next. That's always the big question whenever we're inspired or challenged. What's next?

It's the same with our "Field of Flags." I spend a lot of time looking at the flags. Early in the morning. Late at night. Day after day. They draw me to them. And you'll join me, I know you will, I see you out there. I see people day and night stopping to look. But what's next? After the looking, what's our doing? There are voices urging us to go into Syria, go after Iran, go find

Edward Snowden. There are 6,700 flags out there, and perhaps those voices think we have plenty of room to plant more flags. That's one response to standing and looking. Or we can accept the angels' invitation to stop looking, after a respectful time of remembrance, stop looking and take that memory out into the world with a renewed commitment to the Prince of Peace.

Peace talk is never that popular. You get called a "peacenik" or "hippie" or worse. Usually not by soldiers. In my experience, soldiers seem to have a heavy interest in peace. Invariably they wish it for themselves, and for their buddies.

There are 6,700 flags outside our church. The war in Iraq is mostly over. Afghanistan is winding down. There is not one family among the 6,700 represented outside that doesn't wish things had wound down 24 hours before its loved one was killed. Sixty-seven hundred "peacenik" families, proud of their loved ones. Proud of their courage and service and sacrifice. We're proud.

To want peace is not to surrender or put our heads in the sand or close our eyes to the evils of the world. To want peace is just to want fewer flags outside. And that takes work. The work of peace is not easy.

But here's my point. The Book of Acts is called the Book of Acts because it tells the "acts," the actions of that small group of believers who really believed that the Prince of Peace was worth acting upon. He said, Jesus said, "Go, ye into all the world teaching ALL that I have commanded." And what Jesus taught was a whole new way of living, a new way of relating to people, a new way of treating people.

Look at how Jesus treated the Roman Centurion. Look at how Jesus treated the thief on the cross. Look at how Jesus treated the Pharisee, Nicodemus, and the hated Zacchaeus, and the woman who had been married five times, and was working on number six. Look at how Jesus treated the leper, the children, the grieving sister, the worried mother, the enemy, the outcast, the woman caught in adultery. With Jesus there's always a personal engagement, a tenderness, an openness, a willingness. No door is closed. No opportunity is lost.

I'm not Pollyanna, we're not about to stop wars or cap the number of flags outside. But I'd like to see us, as Christians, approach peace the same way the military does. They keep trying to improve their arsenal, their choices and options. "Let's try a new surge, let's try a new tank ... a new plane ... new drone technology." Good for them, that's their job; they're trying to stay one step ahead of the enemy. So should we, as Christians. If our goal is

to be Christlike, and if Christ is the Prince of Peace, then how do we improve our arsenal for peace, our choices and options?

We've been looking at St. Luke's Book of Acts at our weekly Bible Study. It's about those early Christians spreading Jesus's teachings. It's full of lessons, good and bad, about how to succeed. Take St. Stephen, for example. St. Stephen was a great figure, the first Christian martyr, heroic, courageous, bold. He had a great chance to tell about Jesus, and he chose a certain way: insulting, aggressive, dismissive, prejudiced, demeaning. So they killed him.

St. Paul took a different approach. He went to Athens, the intellectual heart of the ancient world, the seedbed of ideas, including democracy. Acts 17 tells us that Paul enjoyed his time there as a tourist; he walked around the city taking in the sights, soaking up local culture, stopping in and visiting all the various religious temples dedicated to various gods in all their various forms. He didn't boycott it. He didn't turn up his nose at it. He didn't mock it. And when Paul got the chance to speak, he started off with a compliment, a personal connection, and an invitation. Paul says to the crowd, "I see that you are very religious. I've been walking around and I saw for myself, very carefully, your objects of worship. I even found one temple dedicated to "An Unknown God." I am here to tell you about that Unknown God". Then he told them about Jesus. Successfully. Effectively. With good results.

Two very different approaches, aren't they? With two very different results. One guy succeeded. One guy failed. One guy lived. One guy died. And yet most of the world, most of the religious world, even most of the Christian world has chosen St. Stephen's approach: insulting, angry, deadly.

For the next three weeks you and I will be looking a lot at these flags. Every time we drive by, when we come to church next Sunday, when we enjoy our church picnic right outside the church. We'll look. We'll honor. We'll remember. And that is truly a beautiful thing. But when the looking is done, after being inspired and moved and touched, then we need to redouble, retriuple, requadruple our efforts to bring Christlikeness to every edge of the world, to decisions and decision-makers, to powers and power-brokers, to friends and strangers, to opponents, critics, and enemies. And we can do that in honor of 6,700 friends just outside our window.

Our job, well done, is the best "thank you" for their job, well done.