

Jesus had a lot to say about a lot of things during his life on this Earth. His most beloved sayings have come down to us, faithfully preserved by the gospel-writers. You probably have your personal favorites. Perhaps one or two of these are among them:

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Luke 6:31). “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own” (Matthew 6:34).

I could go on, of course, because there’s no shortage of wise sayings by Jesus. But have you ever wondered about Jesus’ *last* words — the final things the risen Christ says before he ascends into heaven? After all, most people regard a person’s last words as especially significant. Somehow, they’re supposed to encapsulate what that person was all about. And if that’s true for an ordinary Joe or Jane, wouldn’t it be true for the Lord and Savior of humankind?

For Matthew, the Lord’s last words are the last part of the great commission. After Jesus has charged his disciples to spread the good news and baptize in his name, he concludes, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Mark’s gospel — at least in its shorter, original ending — contains no last words of the resurrected Jesus. The disciples simply discover his empty tomb. The book ends inconclusively: “Terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

According to the gospel of John, Jesus’ final words include speaking to Peter about “the beloved disciple,” who may have been John himself. Jesus says, “If it is my will that he remains until I come, what is that to you?” Wow, those last words sound a little snarky, don’t they?

But onward to Luke, our Gospel lesson and focus for today. Just before ascending into heaven, Jesus promises 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.” Afterwards, the Apostle continues his narrative for a few more verses, telling how Jesus lifts up his hands and blesses the disciples, but those words of final blessing are a mystery. So, Jesus’ last-known words are a promise of “power from on high” in Luke’s report.

Power is a source of endless fascination. Our earliest years are characterized by a burgeoning search for power. First, it’s power over our own bodies, as we learn to walk. Then, it’s power over others, in the emotional wrestling matches of our “terrible twos.” It’s not long before we learn that tantrums aren’t the best way of achieving durable power.

Childhood brings fantasies of power that make us bigger and stronger than we really are. If you are of a certain age you may remember the He-Man cartoon of your youth, or maybe your children watched it. That cheesy but entertaining show featured a bare-chested superhero who carried a big sword in a sheath on his back. When He-Man really needed to take care of a villain, he’d unsling his mighty sword, lift it towards the heavens, so it could serve as a sort of lightning rod, and he would call out, “By the Power of Greys skull, I have the power!” Strong stuff indeed for the young audience of fans watching, who so often felt powerless themselves!

For many of us, our choice of occupation may be swayed by our desire for power. In fact, lots of our daydreams about becoming wealthy are really about power. After all, while it’s true that money can’t buy happiness, it can certainly buy power. And some of us choose certain careers over other options because of the power they promise. Think about it, anyone who aspires to a job in law enforcement, politics, or business management must contend with the lure of power — not only what it can do to us, but also to those around us.

As our personal power grows, however, there’s an adverse spiritual transformation that can ambush us if we’re not careful. The Jewish theologian

Martin Buber wrote about this. He observed that power can be handled safely only so long as it remains “bound to the goal, to the work, to the calling.” But what if powerful people lose track of that essential connection — if they begin to think of power as their personal privilege, their perk, their possession? If that should happen, says Buber, then such power “is evil; it is power withdrawn from responsibility, power which betrays the spirit, power in itself.”

You’ve probably heard the proverb spoken by the British aristocrat Lord Acton back in the Victorian era. “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” A century before, on our side of the Atlantic, the former President James Madison said something very similar. “Power, lodged as it must be in human hands, will ever be liable to abuse.”

But is that the sort of power Jesus is promising his disciples in his last words in Luke’s gospel? More than likely it is not. Jesus is promising them not ordinary human power, but “power *from on high*.” But what could he mean by that?

The word for “power” the Lord uses in today’s narrative is ordinary human power, *dunamis*, in the Greek. That same Greek word inspired the Norwegian inventor Alfred Nobel as he sought to name a new explosive he’d invented, dynamite. But Jesus doesn’t use the word *dunamis* without qualification. He modifies it with the words, “from on high.” If such power originates on high — with God — and comes to us as a divine gift, then it’s impossible to misdirect it towards selfish ends.

Nobel’s dynamite can be used for peaceful purposes, like blasting through bedrock to tunnel under a mountain. But it can also be used to destroy and to kill. But, not so with power from on high. Godly power, if it’s truly godly, is only capable of being used for good. In other words, there are two kinds of power in this world, destructive human power and creative divine power.

A stick of dynamite blasts a tree stump to smithereens. That's destructive power. A growing tree root presses up against a slab of concrete sidewalk, slowly and methodically heaving it up as though it were a piece of Styrofoam. That's creative power. One type of power is short, intense, and loud. The other is slow, persistent, and silent. Of the two, creative power is the strongest by far, and the promise of our faith is that this power wins out in the end. But let's be honest: destructive power too often reigns supreme in our present age. In the wrong hands, it threatens to demolish all that's good and kind and lovely.

There's a scene in Steven Spielberg's movie, "Schindler's List," when Oskar Schindler — the factory owner who hoodwinked the Nazis by saving many of his Jewish workers from concentration camps — is arguing with a brutish Nazi commandant, trying to get him to release a group of prisoners to labor in his factory. The commandant is an inhuman monster. For entertainment, he sits at the window of his quarters and randomly shoots Jewish prisoners with a high-powered rifle.

Still, Schindler seeks to reason with the barbaric officer. He argues that the commandant's life-and-death authority is not real power. Real power, Schindler argues, is the power not to deal out death indiscriminately, but to hold back — to restrain oneself. Real power is the power to forgive.

Schindler gets his contract laborers and for a few days the commandant cleans up his act. He gets a sort of perverse satisfaction out of pardoning prisoners. But before long, brutality triumphs over reason, and he's back to his old murderous tricks.

The commandant fails at forgiveness because to truly forgive others you must feel something for them — sympathy, compassion, love. The Nazi officer doesn't feel a thing for Jews, or perhaps anyone — maybe not even himself.

“Like a roaring lion,” says 1 Peter, “your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.” There are too many in this world who build their lives around grabbing as much of this sort of power as they can. “Do unto others before they do unto you” is their motto.

During Holy Week we heard the story of how Jesus stood before the terrible power of Rome in courageous, virtuous silence. And that power rose up and crushed him. For Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, Herod and the emperor in far-off Rome — that should have been the end of the story. But we all know it wasn’t. There was another power at work in the life — and even the death — of Jesus. A power from on high.

That creative, life-giving power began its work in the cool silence of his tomb. That power worked much more rapidly, on that occasion, than it habitually does in our world. A mere three days later, life coursed through Jesus’ veins again. He rose up and walked. And ever since that day, the power of life so powerfully active in Jesus Christ has continued to grapple with the power of death. It’s a long, slow struggle — but the witness of our faith is that life is winning and will one day triumph.

The little Christian community whose story Luke was telling did not, as it turned out, need to wait until the end of days to behold power from on high busting out amongst them. Unlike the other three gospels, the gospel of Luke is volume one of a two-volume work. The second volume, of course, is the Acts of the Apostles. Luke opens his second volume with the story of Pentecost and how the Holy Spirit descended upon that little band of disciples and so transformed their spiritual lives that they were able to change the world.

Jesus’ promise of power from on high is not, in fact, his last word. He spoke again and continues to speak. And we can witness the continued fulfillment of that promise even today in those inspired moments when Christ’s church reaches

beyond its human nature to reflect something of the Divine in the ways we live out our faith together as the hands and feet of Jesus in our world.

So, how do we sum up the last words of Jesus in Luke, the promise he offers to his church — frail and flawed as that all-too-human community sometimes is? Well, we may feel at times like we're little children, He-Man fans raising our child-sized swords hopefully to the heavens. But our Lord's word to us is that we don't need to connect with a powerful bolt of lightning. Because the truth is, we already have, we have been gift of the Holy Spirit and the faith to believe. Never forget our Lord's promise: *you have the power!* Yes, the power of God's Spirit within you. Amen.