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Luke 23:44–46 (NLT):

44 By this time it was about noon, and darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. 45 The light from the sun was gone. And suddenly, the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn down the middle. 46 Then Jesus shouted, "Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!" And with those words he breathed his last.

Acts 1:1–11 (NLT):

In my first book I told you, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began to do and teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions through the Holy Spirit. 3 During the forty days after he suffered and died, he appeared to the apostles from time to time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. And he talked to them about the Kingdom of God.

4 Once when he was eating with them, he commanded them, "Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before.

5 John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

The Ascension of Jesus

6 So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, "Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?"

7 He replied, "The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

9 After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. 10 As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. 11 "Men of Galilee," they said, "why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you

into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!”

Acts 2:1–4 (NLT):

On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. 2 Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. 3 Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. 4 And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

The Gospel of the Holy Spirit.

When people talk about the “last words” of Jesus Christ, they often get into a debate about which Gospel has it right. Matthew seems to report Jesus’ last words on the cross as being: *“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”*

The last words that Mark attributes to Jesus on the cross are the same as what Matthew describes. John appears to list Jesus’ last words on the cross as: *“It is finished!”* The last words that Luke says Jesus spoke are: *“Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!”* In truth, there’s a possibility that Jesus said all three of

these things, because it isn’t explicitly stated that Jesus didn’t say anything else after he made whatever remarks the given Gospel writer attributed to Jesus.

There are scholars who have lined up the timeline of Jesus’ final hours and concluded that perhaps Luke’s version is the true last-last. That’s why I chose Luke’s version for our Bible quote today.

But wait. Jesus came back and visited the Apostles after he died. In fact, our second quote today says that he visited them on and off for forty days. The absolute last quoted words of Jesus on Earth appear in Acts and they were spoken to the Apostles: *“Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before. 5 John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”* So, instead of saying the desperate words: *“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”*, or *“It is finished!”*, or the somewhat more upbeat *“Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!”*, we see that Jesus’ last quoted words in the Bible are actually extremely positive. Jesus promises the Apostles that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit, and then they are to go forth and spread the word to the ends of the earth – and maybe back then, even Jesus didn’t know that the earth doesn’t have any ends.

This is the so-called “great commission” of the Apostles by Jesus. This is actually a repeat of something that Jesus said to the Apostles while he was still alive and carrying on his own ministry. In Matthew 28, in fact, in the very last words of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says: *“...go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

So, the last thing that Jesus did on Earth wasn't to ask his father why he had to suffer or to declare that it's all over or to offer himself into his father's hands. The last thing that Jesus did was repeat to the Apostles their mission to go out and evangelize the world. In doing so, he promises them that the Holy Spirit will come to them and empower them. Now, we know that Jesus wanted the Apostles to go out and preach to Jews and Gentiles alike. We know that ours is an evangelizing faith, unlike Judaism.

But let's focus on this concept of receiving the Spirit. A common phrase among early Christians was to say to each other: "*Receive the Spirit*". The use of these two words together, Holy and Spirit, only occurs a couple of times in the Old Testament, and they are relatively late in the Old Testament, dating to the period after the Jews have returned from exile in Babylon. But these words appear together more than 100 times in the New Testament. So, although the word "Spirit" appears alone many times in the Old Testament, the concept of the Holy Spirit is a New Testament concept. The difference between the concept of the Spirit in the Old and New Testaments is a qualitative one, however, and not something with an extremely sharp difference. In the Old Testament, the Spirit is generally not called the Holy Spirit. And, in the Old Testament, the Spirit is said to

be “with” people, while in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is “in” or “within” believers.

Interestingly, the word that is used to refer to the Holy Spirit in the Greek of the New Testament is “Pneuma”. It is a deeply nuanced word. It refers to wind, human breath, and life. It was used to refer to human to human relationships. It had to do with the bond that held people together. We can see how rich and how personal the term Holy Spirit must have felt to the early Christians. But it sounds more cosmic than personal to us. As a Catholic kid, we called it the Holy Ghost, as if it was the saintly version of a dead person who floats mysteriously around the world. But to the first Christians, there was already a notion of Spirit as something that could lift someone up or carry them along. Then through the words of Jesus and the writings of early Christians like Paul, the Spirit became something that could be indwelling, or permanently present in the being of a Christian believer. The Holy Spirit could give us eternal life or the breath of God.

In the New Testament there are 379 occurrences of pneuma, or Spirit. And to be exact, in 149 of these, it is expressed as the *Pneuma Hagion*, or Holy Spirit. Remember that the Old Testament was written almost entirely in Hebrew. And the New Testament was written in Greek. So, when you consider the sharp

increase in the reference to a Spirit in the New Testament compared to the Old Testament, along with the extremely loaded meaning of the word Spirit in Greek, you can see that the Holy Spirit was a powerful concept to the first Christians. It's also important to remember that the notion of a trinity didn't formally emerge until the third century A.D., so early Christians were not focused on the Holy Spirit simply as one of three Gods-in-one. The trinity sounds almost academic to us. So, something that we see as part of this hard-to-understand concept of three Gods in one being, or perhaps as some ghostly apparition, came across as a deeply personal and moving notion to the people who first read the New Testament scriptures. Thus, although we often make the mistake of not thinking about the Holy Spirit in such a personal way, we can embrace this incredible visualization: the Holy Spirit that appeared as a flame and went to dwell permanently within the Apostles. There was even more to this, though, in the early church. There was a fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Remember that the Greek word for Spirit could also refer to the bond between two or more people. This fellowship of the Holy Spirit took the form of a shared experience that held the earliest Christian community together.

Now, there are people who look at this passage where the Holy Spirit descends upon the Apostles and then dwells within them, allowing them to

apparently speak in languages they didn't know, and make this a core concept of their faith, but in a very active way. They speak in tongues during their church services. We don't do this.

But, the Holy Spirit and its relationship to the United Methodist Church is largely why I landed in the United Methodist Church after leaving the Catholic Church. You see, Methodists are Holy Spirit people, even if we don't take as literal of an approach as some Pentecostals do. The original Methodist revival was a Holy Spirit-born resurgence. Wesley himself was at times close to be a charismatic; he would become very emotional when talking about the Holy Spirit – or the Holy Ghost – as he often referred to the Holy Spirit. He said this about how the Holy Spirit affected him: [I] “...*cried strong in my heart. I sweated. I trembled. I fainted. I sung...*”. He wrote about people feeling the Holy Spirit within them and dropping “... *on every side as [if] thunderstruck.*”

John Wesley's words spoke to me when I was choosing a new church. Like me, he had a very academic side to him. He wrote extremely long sermons that used big language and laid out complex arguments. (Would you like me to do that here?) But he was also very down to earth as a believer. He taught me that while the Bible is a beautiful, amazing thing full of enough wisdom to keep a

thoughtful person busy for a hundred lifetimes, we must not forget that the purpose of Scripture is to teach us about God and how we can connect with our God. And we do this through the Holy Spirit. I'll save you from listening to John Wesley's 1700s English, which can be very difficult to decipher. But essentially, he believed that the role of the Holy Spirit was to confirm in our hearts the power and the truth of the Bible. It is the Holy Spirit that allows us to truly believe and to trust in God.

The notion of the "Holy Spirit" helps us conceptualize the presence of God living within us. The Holy Spirit is what tells us that the Bible is true, that it is indeed the word of God. The Holy Spirit is what ignites our faith within us. It is the Holy Spirit that connects us not only to God, but to each other, as believers. The Holy Spirit convinces us that sin is real, and that we sin. The Holy Spirit regenerates us when we repent. The Holy Spirit guides us toward truth. The Holy Spirit also gives us comfort when we are scared or sick or hurt.

Remember that Jesus devoted 40 days after he had been crucified to preparing the Apostles to receive the Holy Spirit. This was, in a sense, a handoff of his mission on Earth from Jesus to the Holy Spirit. From then on out, God's presence on earth would be carried out by the Holy Spirit. And today, while so

many people wait for Jesus to return, we forget that the Holy Spirit is already here, within each of us. The Holy Spirit is God's active force on earth. When we do something for someone else, and when it doesn't benefit us personally in any way, it is the Holy Spirit working through us. That is why the Book of Acts, which was not titled by its author, is often called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. It isn't the history of the Apostles and their acts. It is the history of the Holy Spirit's acts through the actions of the Apostles. In fact, the Gospels are biographies of Jesus and so maybe Acts is the biography of the Holy Spirit living within and acting through the Apostles, Paul and the other evangelists described in the book.

One last thing. My belief is that that the times when I have most strongly felt the Holy Spirit working through me are when I have stood beside loved ones in a trauma bay at Boulder Community Hospital. I remember vividly standing alongside a father as a team worked desperately to save his son who had tried to kill himself. I held the father up as he spoke with his semiconscious son, then waited with him for hours while his son was in surgery, and then sat beside him in his son's ICU room. Days later, when that young man walked out of the hospital, the father thanked me for being there for him. He told me that he could feel God's presence when I was with him. I told him that so could I. My great hope is that with the Holy Spirit working through me, I can similarly serve this church.