

JESUS ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN

Mark 1:9-11

I invite you to open your Bible to **Acts 1:9-11**. Our journey through the Apostles' Creed has brought us to Jesus' ascension: "*he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God.*" The ascension is mentioned **numerous times** in the Scripture. It shows up in Mark and Luke. The line in the creed sounds almost identical to Mark 16:19 – "*So the Lord Jesus, after speaking with them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.*" You don't have to dig around in the Scripture to find the ascension. Paul mentions its implications in his letters. Hebrews does the same. But this morning, we are looking at Luke's description of the event in Acts. Hear the word of the Lord ... (***read the text***).

I've told you before about my college friend **Doug Scott** and his story about the annual passion play that went awry in his Catholic high school in Chicago. Because the collapsible spear did not collapse, when the soldier stabbed Jesus on the cross, he actually *stabbed* him. Jesus had to go to the Emergency Room and couldn't finish the play. His understudy was larger than the young man he replaced.

So in the last scene, the **grand climax** of the play, Jesus ascends to heaven. He is hooked up to a wire and sandbag counter-balance system that slowly takes him up, off stage, into the rafters, and out of view. The stage crew did not account for the heavier Jesus. So when the stand-in Jesus gave his little speech and pushed off the floor, he went up about two feet and came back down. Three times in all he did this (to the growing snickers from the audience). And that's when it happened: the panicked back-stage crew quickly hurled a couple of more sandbags on the weight system, and poor Jesus shot up like a rocket, hit the rafters, somehow came unhitched in the collision, and crumpled back to the stage floor in a heap.

This is something of a **metaphor** for the way we tend to treat the ascension. We give most of our energy to the cross and resurrection, and we should. But we say little of the ascension. It lays around on church floors like a heap of laundry. We bypass it, step over it, and walk around

it. We move from resurrection to second coming and pay little attention to ascension. And when we do, we miss something valuable for our faith.

I

Luke tells the story in our text. It has been 40 days since Jesus rose from the dead. He has made numerous appearances to his followers. Since resurrection, he lived in a glorified body not fit for earth's present form. It was time for him to go home—to ascend back into the heaven from which he descended some 30+ years earlier when he *“was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.”* So Jesus gathered his followers. Told them to wait for the Holy Spirit. Told them that when the Spirit came, they would receive power and be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

Then **it happened**. He was taken up in a cloud. The cloud is probably to be interpreted as the cloud of the Shekinah glory of God, the cloud which rested upon the tent of meeting in the days of Moses to mark the Lord's glory and presence, the cloud that surrounded Jesus at his transfiguration, and the cloud upon which he'll come when he returns. Glory, glory, and more glory!

Captivated and confused by the scene, the disciples were *“gazing into heaven,”* mouths open, eyes as big as saucers shielded from the sun by the cloud that **took their Lord away**. It's hard to see someone you love and need and count on go away. After the divorce, I rarely saw my father. Occasionally, he would come from Arkansas to Branson to see us boys. He didn't stay long. Said he'd be back to see us soon. But past experience made one thing clear: his “soon” felt more like “never.” He went away, and we boys had to learn to live without him.

And now Jesus' followers were going to have to learn to **live without the physical presence** of Jesus. The only Jesus they knew was the one they could see and touch. They could lock eyes. Hug. Arm wrestle. They could walk together from Jericho to Jerusalem, chatting all the way. They could share fish and bread around the campfire. Jesus was present, visible, here. And now—poof—he's gone.

Who would **explain his parables** to them? Who would calm their storms? Who would teach them, correct them, inspire them, defend them, encourage them, show them the way? The Holy Spirit they *couldn't* see would do these things, but they had to wait ten more days till the Lord sent him down. So there they stood ... alone. No Jesus. No Holy Spirit.

Sensing his disciples' anxiety, **the angels said**, *"This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way you have seen him going into heaven."* But when? In weeks? Months? A couple of years or so? Soon? Early on, Jesus' followers thought his return would be soon. It wasn't. He didn't come back in their lifetimes. And here we are 2000 years later, and we're still waiting. We are on earth. Our Lord Jesus Christ is in heaven. But the disciples learned what the Scriptures teach: Jesus' ascension is not a bad thing; it's a good thing.

II

It's good for Jesus

The pre-existent Christ left the glories of heaven to **descend to earth**. It was not exactly a Caribbean cruise. As the God-Man, Jesus experienced the full scope of pain and struggles that you and I experience: everything from scrapes, bumps, and bruises, to devil-temptations, to grief and sorrow, to scorn and insult, to being misunderstood and maligned, to bearing our sin in his body, and even death.

But Jesus **left all that behind** when he ascended into heaven: insult replaced by angel praise, sin's carnage replaced by holiness, a broken creation replaced by unity and harmony and perfect peace, the presence of evil replaced by *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,"* and a culture of death and dying replaced by life and only life. Leaving behind the conditions of earth and ascending to heaven is good for Jesus.

It also means **Jesus' humiliation becomes exaltation**. As Paul recorded in Philippians 2, Jesus came down from heaven, took the form of a servant, became a man, humbled himself and was

obedient even unto death on a cross—humiliation. Everyone in that day agreed on one thing: nothing was more humiliating than to be hung on a cross. But Paul doesn't end Jesus' story there. He proclaims Jesus' exaltation:

For this reason, God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (2:9-11).

The humiliation of his incarnation and descent gives way to exaltation in his resurrection and ascent.

And Jesus now sits at **the right hand** of God the Father almighty. The right hand is a metaphor. It's the place of preeminence and power. The place of authority and sovereignty. The place from which Christ can see everything. In Acts 7, when the mob was stoning Stephen after his sermon in Jerusalem, Stephen said, *"Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God"* (7:56). Jesus sees everything. Jesus stands up for his people. *"Seated at the right hand"* is a metaphor. Jesus rules and reigns.

Which means the ascension is not just a spiritual triumph, it is a **political triumph**. Richard Lischer explains: *"God has won the victory by overcoming the Son's spatial confinement in the world and replacing it with something far greater."* In the pages that follow in Acts, Herods and Agrippas and other tinhorn lords may try to hinder the church's mission, but they can't stop it.¹ Christ's work goes on and on and on. Acts ends with an adverb to describe the progress of the gospel mission despite stiff opposition. The adverb is *unhindered*. Everything is under the feet of the ascended Christ. All authority is his. **The gates of hell will fight the church tooth and nail, but the gates of hell will never prevail.** Everything is under the feet of the ascended Christ. *"He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty."*

¹I'm indebted for the ideas in these two sentences to Richard Lischer, *The End of Words* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 71-72.

The ascension is good for Jesus.

III

And it is good for us

Psalm 68:18 gives a foretaste of the ascension: *“You ascended to the heights, taking away captives; you received gifts from people, even from the rebellious so that the LORD God might dwell there.”* In Psalm 68, the ascended Christ *received* gifts from people. When Paul quotes that psalm in Ephesians 4:8, he flips it around—the ascended Christ ***gave gifts to people***. The ascended Christ gives good gifts to us.

Christ’s ascension in his glorified body **opens the door for our presence in heaven**. Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

By presenting his own ruined, risen body to be seated at the right hand of God, Jesus imported flesh and blood into those holy precincts for the first time. He paved the way for us By ascending bodily into heaven, he showed us that flesh and blood are good not bad; that they are good enough for Jesus, good enough for heaven, good enough for God. By putting them on and keeping them on, Jesus has not only brought God to us; he has also brought us to God.²

This is a very good thing for us.

The ascension means that **Jesus is available to all of us all the time**. On the earth, Jesus could only be in one place at one time. You want to talk with Jesus on the earth? Better make an appointment. You think it takes a while to get in to see your doctor? If Jesus was still on earth, the line to talk with him would make the line to ride Disney’s magic mountain look short. But ascended and seated at the right hand of the Father, Jesus defies all spatial boundaries. Now he

²Barbara Brown Taylor, from her sermon, “Looking Up to Heaven,” in *Gospel Medicine* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), 73.

has the capacity to hear every prayer as if it is the only one. He is accessible to all of us all the time. If he had an office in heaven, this is the sign that would be on the door: *“No appointment needed and no waiting.”* The ascension is a good thing for us.

The ascension also means that **Jesus can send his Holy Spirit to indwell our lives**. Listen to Jesus in John 16:7 – *“Nevertheless, I am telling you the truth. It is for your benefit that I go away, because if I don't go away the Counselor will not come to you. If I go, I will send him to you.”* The Counselor is the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit is a “benefit” for us in several ways. He indwells us with Jesus’ constant presence, empowers us so we can serve God in his strength and not our own, guarantees and seals our full salvation, gifts us, fills us, prays for us when we don’t know what to say, and fits us with the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, self-control and all the rest. Who doesn’t need all that?

The ascension also means that **Jesus serves as an Advocate for us with the Father**. 1 John 2:1 reads – *“My little children, I am writing you these things so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ the righteous one.”* Jesus advocates for us and intercedes for us in the Father’s presence (Heb 7:25). This does not mean the Father has a different disposition toward us than Jesus. He does not. The Father sees us through his righteous Son who made us righteous through his death and resurrection. Do you see how the ascension is a great blessing to us?

And this blessing too: the ascended **Christ prepares a place for us in heaven**. That’s what he told the disciples in John 14:2 – *“In my Father's house are many rooms; if not, I would have told you. I am going away to prepare a place for you.”* Please don’t think that the ascension means that Jesus is on a well-deserved vacation or taking a much-needed nap or enjoying a well-earned retirement. Just because Jesus is seated doesn’t mean Jesus is not at work. Seated is a metaphor. Jesus is still going about his business. The Church Father Athanasius said of Jesus and the ascension: his earthly ministry is complete; his heavenly ministry had begun.³ Part of that ministry

³Cited by Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 505.

is to prepare a place for us in the Father's house where we will live forever. We've all tried to check into a motel only to be told, *"I'm sorry but your room is not ready."* That won't happen on the other side. When you die and go to heaven: no waiting on your place. Jesus will have it prepared and ready: the windows clean, the floors shining, the beds made, the pillows fluffed, and the aroma of chocolate chip cookies in the oven. (Well, I made up that part, but you get the idea.) The ascension is a good thing for us.

The ascension also gives us the opportunity to **continue Jesus' work in the world**. Just before he ascended, Jesus said in v. 8, *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* Jesus calls us—you and me—to continue his mission: sharing the gospel, helping the poor, freeing the oppressed, healing the sick, loving our enemies, doing justice, feeding the hungry, caring for those in distress. He deploys us to be his witnesses. It's our turn. He showed us the way. He gives us the Spirit. He puts the gospel baton in our hands. He provides us the wisdom and courage and strength. It's our turn to get on with the mission he gave us, to run the race he has set before us. Notice the question the angels ask the disciples when Jesus ascended: *"Why do you stand looking up into heaven?"* That's not the posture of the church. Jesus ascended, Jesus will come again, but in the meantime, we're to be busy about his work, not standing around watching the sky. The ascension is a good thing for us.

And it means one thing more: **Jesus is poised to return when the time is right**. Jesus brought the kingdom of God in part when he came the first time. The kingdom is both here and yet to come, both now and not yet. When Jesus comes the second time, he will bring the kingdom in full. The Scripture teaches us to pray, *"Come, Lord Jesus. Rend the heavens and come down. Come make all things new. Come destroy forever the works of the devil. Come redeem and restore and complete the work you began. Come, Lord Jesus."* It's good prayer. But Jesus couldn't rend the heavens and come down if he hadn't ascended back into heaven in the first place. The ascension is good for us. It means Jesus is poised to return.

The ascension is an important doctrine: good for Jesus, good for you and me.

It takes its rightful place in the Apostles' Creed.

Praise God for the ascension!

IV

And as we prepare to come to the Table of the Lord this morning, the ascension reminds us that even though Jesus' body no longer dwells among us, even though we can't see him with our eyes or touch him with our hands, we can meet him in the Lord's Supper. In a sense, we *can* touch him, and as the psalmist writes, we can "*Taste and see that the Lord is good*" (Ps 34:8).

We meet Jesus in the bread—his body given for us.

We meet him in the cup—his blood poured out for the forgiveness of our sins.

Ascended and seated at the right hand of the Father, Jesus can be everywhere all the time. And he is **here among us in the bread and cup**, reminding us of the sacrifice he made for our salvation, blessing us with a spiritual touch that comforts, strengthens, and encourages us, and commissioning us to be his witnesses in the world of this great, good news:

Jesus came.

Jesus died.

Jesus rose.

Jesus ascended into heaven.

Jesus sits at the right hand of God.

Jesus is coming again.

As we wait for that last piece,
come to the table and give thanks.

INVITATION TO THE TABLE

Come to the table all of you who know Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.
Come with a hungry, grateful, repentant heart.
Come hungry for the only thing that satisfies.

Eat and drink to the glory of God.
And leave full of grace and joy and hope.

PRAYER

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for watching over our lives from your throne in heaven at the right hand. Thank you for meeting us across space and time in the bread and cup at your table. As we come, please cleanse us from our sins, fill us with your Spirit, and send us forth to do your work in the world until you come again.

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