

## ***Blessing Hands Above***

*Luke 24: 50-53*

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The next phrase in the Creed declares, *Jesus ascended into heaven*. It's a crucial, but neglected event in Christ's history. Some years ago, I woke in the night and wondered why I couldn't sleep. After tossing and turning, it finally occurred to me to pray what Samuel in the Bible prayed: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." For the first time in my life, a voice sounded in my head: *I want you to write about my ascension*. "All right," I replied, though I did not know what that meant. I'm a Presbyterian, so I know that you always test private words or visions with God's Word, over time. So I started studying. Scripture and the great fathers of the church. And my heart's passion blazed and my mind was on fire. I had no idea how important the event of Jesus' ascension has been throughout history. It has become a life focus for me. So this morning, I'd like to highlight just five of the many reasons Jesus' ascension matters so much.

### **1) Still in Skin**

The teaching of Scripture is that Jesus, in the same body in which he was crucified and in which he rose, actually did ascend. He went up towards what we know as the sky, until the cloud of God's glory removed him to the heavenly realm. He ascended, and then he went into a dimension to which no vehicle could carry us. From that heaven, he will one day come again to us, still as the God who is ever more also man.

As I've taught on the ascension of Jesus, I find that this is a new thought to many Christians. A lot of us have what Douglas Farrow calls a "drop-in" theory of the incarnation. The eternal Son of God became a human being in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He walked among us in flesh and blood. He was crucified for our sins. He rose victorious and then returned to heaven. So far so good. In our minds, though, we think that when Jesus got back to heaven, he unzipped his skin-suit and stepped out of it. I know if I had been Jesus, that's what I would have done.

A few years ago, our children's choir did a production of *Veggie Tales*, based on the videos which teach Bible stories to kids. As part of the fun, I had to wear the Larry the Cucumber suit. It was pretty disgusting. I don't think the company we rented it from ever cleaned their costumes. It stank of all the other

pastors who ever had to wear it. I couldn't wait to be unzipped and step out of Larry the Cucumber. We might think Jesus would have felt the same way. "Please, get this carcass off me!" But he did not. He has not thrown away the flesh he took up. That body has been transformed, as we said, but it has not been abandoned. Isn't that wild? I can tell you this reality blew apart all the ways people thought of heaven and earth, spirit and body back then. It still does now. The Son of God has stayed joined to our humanity. He has not dropped us.

Paul wrote to the Philippians that Jesus "will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body" (Phil. 3: 21). What Jesus has now, we will have—a body suited to our humanity and also for everlasting life. Right now, Jesus keeps what we are in himself, knitted to his own being. He loves us so much he will never end his union with us. Rather, he will transform us to be like him, outfitted for eternal, embodied life. This is the unbroken witness of Scripture and the great theologians of the church. He went up in a body which he keeps forever. We matter that much to him.

## **2) The Reach of Blessing**

Luke tells us twice for emphasis that as he ascended, Jesus lifted his hands and blessed the disciples. This was the last sight his disciples had of Jesus. Those arms, so recently stretched out in agony on the cross, were now stretched out in triumphant love. Jesus' final gesture with us in the flesh was blessing. If you look at a bright scene, then close your eyes, you will notice that the last image you saw lingers on the inside of your eyelids. Visually speaking, the last thing you see is what lingers on in the mind's eye. This picture, then, of hands raised in blessing as the bright cloud of God's glory enveloped him, is what Jesus wanted to burn into the disciples' minds. Jesus' last words spoken in that unique tenor of voice that belonged to the incarnate Son of God were blessing words. He wanted his benediction to echo in their ears. The Puritan writer John Flavel spoke tenderly of this scene, "There was a great deal of love manifested by Christ in this very last act of his in this world. The last sight they had of him in this world was a most sweet and encouraging one. They heard nothing from his lips but love, they saw nothing in his face but love, till he...was taken out of their sight."<sup>1</sup> Through all they would go through in the coming years, the disciples had this blessed sight for encouragement.

The blessing hands of Christ are over us. Whenever we look up at the sky, we can imagine the ascending Christ with his arms outstretched. Wherever we go, we go under the sky above us, and so wherever we go, we go under the blessing protection and the blessing mission of the Lord Jesus. As Joseph Ratzinger wrote

elsewhere of the disciples, “They knew that they were forever blessed and stood under blessing hands wherever they went.”<sup>2</sup>

The implications for daily life are stirring. How hard are they pressing you? Can you yet look up and see sky? That sky represents the blessing hands of Jesus keeping you even through these days. How curtailed have your powers been by illness or age? Can you at least still imagine sky? Let it remind you of the one who claims you and loves you. How hopeless does the future of the world seem? How far does the arm of evil reach? Look at the sky and remember Jesus’ blessing hands. Evil cannot ever go where Christ is and pull him down into our mire. Nor can it ever prevent his return to set all things right. He is still over us like the sky, his blessing hands like a great shell of protection all of our days on this earth.

### **3) The True Future of Man**

At his trial, Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, while a bloodthirsty crowd clamored for crucifixion. Pilate simply wanted to release Jesus, but the mob pressure was strong. So he had Jesus flogged as a punishment, hoping that would satisfy the crowd and show that Jesus was helpless. He brought the battered and bloodied Jesus before the mob and said, “Behold the man!” (Jn 19: 5).

Theologian Joseph Ratzinger reflected on the significance in this scene, and I will paraphrase his thought. Jesus is the image of God on earth. But he is also the image of *man*, used here as a summary term for all men and women, boys and girls. Jesus is what humankind is supposed to be. The devil and his powers want to tear down the image of God in man. The evil in the world loves to mock us and say, “Look, here is what man is good for. Here is man. Disfigured. Bloodied. His only crown is that of cruel thorns. He is good only for the discard heap.”

Now think how often in our movies and stories this is the way humanity is portrayed. We look at image after image of man humiliated. Man in the gutter. Man searching and groping blindly for meaning, and finding only despair. Man acting like an animal. Man helpless before his lusts. Man violent and destroying. Materialists tell us we came from the primordial ooze. We are nothing but a speck in an indifferent universe. We are here as the result of blind forces. We matter no more than a rock or a pig. Everywhere humanity is portrayed as diminished and helpless and can only continue in self-destruction.

This is where the ascension is so important. Jesus is the one man who lived out perfectly the image of God in a human being. The final picture we have of

Jesus is not the battered, rejected, disgraced Jesus. It is the triumphant, radiant Jesus ascending into heaven. “Behold the man” must be said not only before the crucifixion. It must be said at the ascension. Look, there is man, man as he was meant to be, going to communion with God. There is man, meant to reign in heaven and to judge angels. There is man restored in glory, the very image of the eternal God. So to truly understand what people are, you have to look not just where we came from and where we wallow and slop now, you have to consider where we can go in Christ. Our destiny in Jesus is man in communion, man in glory and harmony, man in loving dominion over a flourishing earth, man restored to a glorious destiny. The ascension is the guarantee, the down payment on all God is going to do to restore his redeemed race. Behold the man! If we are in Christ, we are meant for heaven. We are bound for glory. Our destiny is not the gutter; it is the mansions of the high king where we will live as his sons and daughters.<sup>3</sup>

#### **4) He Sends Us *Here***

The ascension tells us our destiny is upwards. We live from our ascended Christ, drawing upon his Spirit, trusting that his values of forgiveness, forbearance, and all the fruit of the Spirit are the path to life. We lift our eyes to Jesus who is in heaven, but that spiritual vision does not remove us from the world. The ascension also tells us that our mission here on earth is outwards. It actually sends us out to the least and the lost. By staying wedded to our humanity, Jesus affirms that he is still concerned about these flesh and blood humans in the world. He did not drop our humanity from himself. Nor has he fled his love for the world for which he gave his life. To live daily from the ascended Christ is to live constantly for others, sharing in his mission to humanity.

The most daring and engaged ministries of compassion and evangelism will mark churches living in vivid awareness of the continuing incarnation of Jesus. Our Lord is in heaven, but he is also here among the least of the least. Remaining incarnate, he directs us to cherish all those with whom he is a brother after the flesh. Because the Son of God walked among us in flesh he yet retains, he has established the worth of all flesh. Thus, no one is to be left out of the sphere of the church living in the power of the Spirit of the ascended Jesus.

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish theologian William Milligan wrote:

The glorified Lord is human as well as Divine. Even at the right hand of God He is still the man Christ Jesus. The feelings, the emotions, the sympathies of His heart are exactly what they were when He welcomed the first symptoms

of contrition in the woman who came to Him in Simon's house, or when He wept over the unbelief of Jerusalem. Even now He would leave no penitent uncheered, no mourner uncomforted, no friend unloved, no little child unblest; and in -all this He is the truly human as well as the Divine Priest of men... When the Church keeps this in view, there is no human want or weakness strange to her. It is her part to heal every wound and to wipe away every tear.<sup>4</sup>

The heavenly life of Christ directs us away from pursuing the world with its goods, its corridors of power and arenas of entertainment, as an end in itself, but at the same time sends us right into the world with all the sympathies of our Lord to the least and the lost.

### 5) The LORD's Actual Face Shining

Professor Kelly Kopic has argued powerfully for the possibility that Jesus' final blessing was that of the high priest giving Aaron's benediction to the people after atonement for sin had been made. This naming blessing from Numbers 6 takes on even more significance if we consider it coming from mouth of the incarnate Lord himself. Kopic's conclusion thrills me every time I read it:

Whereas Aaron could lift his arms and pray for God's face to shine on the people, in seeing Jesus ascending into the heavens these believers saw the actual face of God shining.

While they had heard of God's graciousness,  
now they had seen him who is Gracious.

While they had held out for God's lifted countenance,  
they now saw it actualized.

While they had longed for the peace promised in the benediction,  
they now knew him who was Peace.

The great High Priest came and not only pronounced the benediction,  
but he *became the benediction*.

Here the medium is the Mediator, and thus he is not to be looked beyond, but rather looked to.

Those who saw the ascension *witnessed the personification of Aaron's benediction in Jesus Christ!*<sup>5</sup>

The disciples experienced the centuries-old longing of God's people being fulfilled before them. No longer through a priest representing God, but from God

himself in the flesh, he engraved his name on their hearts as forever his own. They knew it was a gift of incalculable worth to see Jesus and know him for who he truly is.

So, Luke tells us, the disciples worshipped the ascending Jesus. Then they returned from that event filled with great joy. For the next many days, they “were continually in the temple blessing God” (Lk 24: 53). They had entered God’s blessing loop, receiving and returning. They had joined the massive blessing project of God in the world, the mission of the gospel.

Blessed from the ascended Christ, they knew his presence would keep them always even to the end of the age. This is the LORD himself shining on us. For here is Jesus our Lord, God come among us, himself promising to bless us and keep us all the days of our lives. He has pledged himself to this, by a promise so binding that he has joined our humanity to his divinity forever. Thus, we will always be with Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Kelly Kopic, “Receiving Christ’s Priestly Benediction: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Exploration of Luke 24: 50-53,” *The Westminster Journal of Theology*, vol. 67 (2005):259. I have altered the spacing for emphasis

<sup>2</sup> See Joseph Ratzinger, “The Beginning of a New Nearness,” in *Images of Hope* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp.57-60.

<sup>4</sup> William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord* (London: MacMillan, 1894). 258, 288.

<sup>5</sup> Kopic, “Receiving Christ’s Priestly Benediction,” 252, stylized spacing mine.