

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Why the Ascension Matters**

Luke 24:36-53

Eric Reed tells about how, following an Easter service in 2003, a woman approached a pastor he knows and asked, "So what happened with Jesus after the Resurrection?" "Well, he ascended into heaven and he's still alive," the pastor said. "I know he was resurrected, but he's alive?" she said. "Yes, he's alive," replied the pastor. "Alive? ALIVE?! Why didn't you tell me?!" Then, for the next two weeks, she telephoned everyone she knew and exclaimed, "Jesus is alive! Did you know he's alive?!"

I'm not sure how that woman had managed to separate Jesus' resurrection from his aliveness, but her reaction certainly reminds us that Jesus' ascension is a critical part of our belief that he is the living Lord. So it's good that we return to the end of Luke's Gospel and hear again that Jesus not only appears, but ascends as well. Following the resurrection, Jesus doesn't just make unexpected entrances, but also a dramatic exit. In fact, in a way we can think of the ascension as the culmination of the resurrection event, the ultimate destination of our risen Savior.

If so, the ascension definitely deserves more attention than we often give it. By neglecting it, we risk losing a sense of what makes our Christian faith distinctive, particularly within the larger culture. As Marva Dawn has written:

Ascension Day is the perfect church holiday because the world can't steal it. The culture around us has quite ruined Christmas and Easter. Of course, the world owned Christmas as its festival for the restoration of the sun before the early Christians used it to disguise their celebration of Christ's birth. . . . But the world has now stolen it for its consumeristic purposes and has seized Easter for the same idolatry. In my teen years I played clarinet in the high school band for the town Christmas parade at which Santa Claus was flown in by helicopter. Later, I heard, they flew the bunny in for Easter. But the world hasn't got the foggiest notion what to do with someone flying out.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes, maybe we in the church haven't been sure what to do with the ascension either. It's a very unique part of the story. In this morning's Scripture passage, Luke narrates it very briefly: "While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven" (v. 51). We often use the term "ascension" to refer to what Luke is describing. "Ascend" is a spatial term. It has to do with moving up to the throne, the place of governing authority. So when Luke speaks of Jesus being "taken up" or "led up" into heaven, he's not referring to "heavens" in the sense of the sky, as if Jesus has, through an astounding act of levitation, just moved to another part of the universe. No, Luke means "heaven" in the sense that Jesus has departed into a different realm, such that now the disciples are in a different kind of relationship with him than they were when Jesus was here within time and space.

Like so many other writers in the New Testament, Luke wants his readers to know that Jesus has entered his glory, enthroned and exalted at God's right hand. In other words, the resurrection doesn't just mean that Jesus is no longer among the dead. It also means that he has now entered into, and participates in, the immortal existence of God, God's own life

and power. That is, Jesus is alive, in the fullest and deepest sense of the word. He now has a new and even more powerful form of existence. It's no wonder, as Luke says, that the disciples "worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God" (v. 53).

This sounds like a wonderful way to end the story. But we know that Luke has written a second volume called the book of Acts. And Acts picks up where Luke's Gospel leaves off, by repeating, in greater detail, the story of Jesus' ascension. Now we learn that the disciples need to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the spiritual power they will need to carry out their mission of bearing witness to the world about God's saving work in Jesus. The arrival of the Holy Spirit will be the way that Jesus comes to be present with the community of his followers.

So what does this tell us about the ascension? Is the ascension about Jesus' absence or about his presence? Are we here today to remember that he has gone or that he has come? Is Jesus with God or with us? The answer isn't really either/or, but both. That's part of the mystery of the ascension. It's one of the great paradoxes of our faith. A paradox holds together two seemingly contradictory convictions in a way that actually discloses a deeper reality. Our Christian faith is full of such paradoxes. Jesus is fully divine and fully human. God is absolutely sovereign and we have human freedom. Christian living is about faith and works. God is distant from us and present with us. In other words, certain beliefs may appear to be in tension with one another, but it's in that tension where we see the truth about God and about ourselves.

The ascension tells us that in order for God's purpose for us, and the entire creation, to be accomplished, Jesus must transcend earthly life altogether. He really must leave the realm of mortality in order to bring us into the heavenly realm of life everlasting. In that respect, Jesus departs from us or leaves us, and is absent from us. So in one sense, the ascension tells us that there is a separation, or a distance, between our Lord and us.

But at the same time, the ascension tells us that by making this exit, Jesus is able to make an even greater entrance. Yes, he is absent from us in his former sense of being a historical person, limited in his physical body to a specific period of time and to particular places. As the opening verse of the hymn, "Tell the Good News," reminds us, "Christ was born in a distant land, . . . Lived on earth for the good of man." This is the story of the incarnation, God coming to us in human form through Jesus. He came from heaven to earth and experienced firsthand this mortal life, with all its suffering and sorrows. He bore our sin and took the punishment we deserved. He entered fully into death for our redemption. But neither time nor place, particularly the grave, could hold him. He was raised and returned to the realm of heaven. And by doing so, he became even more powerfully present to us and with us. So the ascension is less about his absence and more about his presence.

In one of her newspaper columns, author and journalist Anna Quindlen wrote about a day care center in Jersey City called "The Nurturing Place." It was run by Roman Catholic sisters. The center welcomed children whose families were homeless. In other words, these were families that had no address. As one commentator has put it:

One day the sisters took the children to the Jersey shore. The 3 and 4 year olds scrambled up the sandy dunes, falling and giggling their way to the top of what must have seemed like mountains to their little legs. When they got to the top, they could hardly believe their eyes: water as far as they could see—more water than they had ever seen. They slid down the dunes and ran to the ocean's edge. They chased the waves that teased their toes. Then they went off for a picnic in a nearby park. After lunch they begged to go back to the dunes. One

little boy named Freddie outran the rest and climbed his way to the top. He looked out, then turned to the others and shouted, "It's still there!"<sup>2</sup>

In Freddie's short life, so much had disappeared. Perhaps even the ocean could disappear over lunch. But when he got back, it was still there.

For Jesus' first disciples, the experience of his departure, and the prospect of being left alone in this world, could have left them with questions about what, if anything, could be counted on. But they soon learned that Jesus was still there. In fact, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus was there in an even greater, fuller, more powerful way than before. And because this was so then, we too have access to his presence now. What Jesus accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection then can become a reality in our lives here where we are now. The Spirit connects us to Christ, who lives and reigns with God. He rules creation together with God. This is why so many other parts of the New Testament speak of Jesus as sharing royal power with the Father. In one way or another, these texts describe Jesus as enthroned, as seated at the right hand of God.

Thomas Long tells about a former student who described a summer he spent as a laborer on a construction crew. He said that his foreman was a kind and gracious person. So if a worker got sick on the job, he understood and made arrangements. If a worker had problems at home and was late or absent from work, the foreman would cover for him. But the one thing this foreman would not tolerate was if a worker would sit down on the job before the work was done. To sit down was a sign that the job was done, and to do so beforehand was a violation of a sacred trust.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus has taken his seat at the right hand of God. The work is done. The work of reuniting God and humanity. The work of securing your forgiveness, and your deliverance from the power of sin and death. The work of God being with us and our being with God. The work of God establishing his reign and bringing about a new creation. Without the ascension of Jesus, none of this is complete.

I hope that what I've said in this sermon has given you a renewed sense of why the ascension matters so much to our Christian faith. We have Christmas to celebrate Jesus' birth, Holy Week to remember his suffering and death, and Easter to rejoice in his resurrection. But even the good news that Christ is risen doesn't take us as far as we really need to go, and as far as God intends us to go.

Recall the woman at the beginning of today's sermon. She knew Jesus had been raised, but it was as if she didn't really understand his aliveness until someone reminded her of Jesus' ascension. From there, she spent the next two weeks on the phone telling people that Jesus is alive. I'm thinking that if the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus had been enough, Luke could have ended his Gospel a few verses sooner than he actually did. But instead, he uses his last four verses, and the beginning of the book of Acts, to show us how the departure of Jesus actually sets the stage for the arrival of Jesus, who is now present, in the power of the Spirit, primarily through this worshiping and witnessing community of people called the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Marva J. Dawn, Eugene H. Peterson, and Peter Santucci, *The Unnecessary Pastor: Rediscovering the Call* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 140.

<sup>2</sup> As told by Barbara Lundblad at the Working Preacher website. Accessed May 5, 2016 <[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2850](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2850)>.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas G. Long, "Imagine There's No Heaven: The Loss of Eschatology in American Preaching," *Journal for Preachers* (Advent 2006) 27.