

He Ascended Into Heaven

Acts 1:1-11

It's pop quiz time – open book. In what part of worship do we utter the words, “He (meaning Jesus Christ) ascended into heaven?” It's right there in the front of our hymnals – “The Apostles Creed.” The Apostles Creed is a statement of faith that was developed in the third and fourth century and came out of questions asked of those who wanted to be baptized. When I teach young people about Church History and Church Worship I will recommend that they study the Apostle's Creed. It's a great reminder of the foundations of Christian faith and it's an easy way to respond to someone who asks what you believe about God.

More often than not, though, I hear those words spoken in worship in a tone reminiscent of a conversation about weather (sometimes people seem more passionate about the weather); and I think the reason for the ho-hum declaration of “He ascended into heaven,” is because we aren't really thinking about what it means.

Without the ascension of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit, there is no Church. And, as with so many aspects of the Kingdom of God, the ascension is two experiences at once. It is simultaneously the absence and presence of Jesus Christ. Christ's physical body is absent from this world and present in the throne room of God. And Christ's spirit is still with us in a very real sense bridging the two worlds.

As I contemplated this absence and presence of Christ this week I was reminded of the 1990 movie, “Ghost.” In the movie a guy named Sam is murdered and becomes a ghost and his lady love, Molly, is devastated. Sam, as a ghost, is able to figure out who killed him – and why – and realizes that Molly is in danger. Unable to communicate with Molly in a face-to-face way, he engages the assistance of a psychic to tell Molly what's going on. Molly is skeptical and Sam needs a way to prove to her that he is really still present. In order to convince Molly, Sam finds out from another ghost how to channel emotions in order to move objects. This, along with his getting the psychic to share things with Molly that only Sam would know convinces Molly that Sam is still with her even though he died.

Did you catch that? A ghost teaches Sam how to channel emotions to make an impact in the world. Similarly, the Holy Ghost – the terms ghost and spirit are interchangeable in Greek – is life and breath to our souls. The Holy Ghost enables us to move forward in resurrection power and animate the Church and world with the power of the Gospel. And it's the Holy Ghost that is being promised as Jesus Christ ascends.

The opening verses of the Book of Acts are a continuation of the Gospel of Luke, you might refer to it as Luke Part II. And, for the record I have no idea why the Gospel of John is between the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Luke ends his Gospel with an abbreviated version of the ascension of Jesus and the closing words, "They (the disciples) were continually in the Temple blessing – some translations say worshipping - God." Acts begins with the ascension of Jesus covered in greater detail and it goes on to share the exciting adventures of the first people to spread the Gospel. Acts tells the story of the birth of the Church so that, by the time you reach the next book (Romans), you understand how a church came to exist in Rome. And Acts is also telling the continuation of the story of Jesus. Though Jesus is only mentioned in the first nine verses of the book, His presence is in the midst of all the action – and there is lots of action in Acts.

Following a literary custom Luke dedicates his work to "Theophilus," a word meaning, "Lover of God." There may have actually been a Theophilus or Luke could be using the term as a description of a church or an individual who was seeking to know more about the impact of the life of Jesus.

Luke informs and reminds in these first verses of Act; reminding Theophilus and other readers that what Jesus did and taught is recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Then, Luke shares that Jesus appeared to the disciples and others for 40 days after his resurrection. In the 40 days he came and went – possibly as a way to prepare them for the day we are looking at today. And during the time with his disciples he told them to stay in Jerusalem until they were baptized by the Holy Spirit. In that verse about baptism by the Holy Spirit, Jesus refers to John the Baptist's baptism with water. I believe this is to let His followers know that a new thing is happening.

John's baptism was one of repentance. The Spirit's baptism will be one of power. When the Spirit baptizes, people and groups are plunged into a whole new world.

This is the only place in the New Testament that refers to 40 days between the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. If you've studied the Bible you will likely know that the number 40 appears in lots of places, almost 150 times. Moses was on the mountain with God for 40 days; the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years; Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days; etc. There is debate among Bible scholars concerning the significance of the number 40; but, to me, it seems that 40 is, at least in part, representative of God's doing a new thing. I once read that psychologists believe it takes approximately 40 days to change behavior and develop new habits. Jesus sticking around for 40 days may have been a way of telling his disciples to get used to a new way of relating.

When the disciples were all together they asked Jesus if he was going to restore the kingdom to Israel. They were looking for a political restoration – for Israel to overthrow Rome and become a sovereign country. But Jesus tells them, gently, that the time of Israel's restoration is God's domain, not theirs.

Then Jesus seems to change the subject – or perhaps he is picking up on the theme of power and playing with the idea of worldly political power versus spiritual power and he says you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and that power will equip you to be my witnesses in Jerusalem (where they were), in all Judea (the surrounding area), and Samaria (a place full of Samaritans who didn't fraternize with Jews) and to the ends of the earth (even here today in this sanctuary).

After this promise that the Holy Spirit will come, the disciples watch their Lord disappear into a cloud. As they stand craning their necks toward the cloud in which Jesus was enveloped, two men in white robes appear and say, "Why are you looking up toward heaven? Jesus – who has just been taken from you into heaven will return the same way."

I hear a lot of people talk about heaven as if it is some far away place that is to be our home when we die, but that concept of heaven as somewhere out there isn't supported in the Bible. Scripture teaches that heaven and earth are two parts of a whole and that God exists in both places. The risen body of Jesus Christ was able to move from the earthly to heavenly dimensions – and by entering the heavenly realm as He did, He opens up the possibility that one day the two parts of the sphere will be unified. This is the vision of the new heaven and earth we read about in other parts of the New Testament.

Here are some lessons in this passage for the Church today.

1. **Believe in the resurrection and live as if it's true.** Jesus gave His followers lots of proof because he wanted them to have certainty regarding the fact that the grave did not keep Him. And He wants us to be able to live with the sure knowledge that it will not hold us either.
2. **Live into the Kingdom of God that has already come in the incarnation and life of Jesus Christ but isn't yet fully realized because our world is still a mess waiting for Christ's return.** When Jesus entered the world as a baby, the big event that we celebrate at Christmas, the world was given hope. The responsibility of all who claim Christ as Lord is to share that hope – share that story – with a world growing increasingly hopeless. Share the vision of a new heaven and new earth – renewal and wholeness are at the heart of Jesus' message.
3. **Understand that the power of the Church comes from the Holy Spirit.** Ordinary people are empowered to do extraordinary things in the Spirit's power.
4. **Believe that Jesus will come again as the angels told the disciples that He would.**

This nice neat list of four things sounds good; but, in my experience, it's challenging to live out in our world today. In a world full of skeptics, critics, political correctness and cancel culture, it's hard to cling to beliefs like these. It's hard to make time to listen to the Holy Spirit when there is so much going on. And it has been such a long time since these events took place. I don't blame anyone who wonders if Christ really is going to return. So, what are we to do?

I don't have all the answers to that question, but I can tell you some things that help me. First, pray and ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to understanding, then read the accounts of Jesus' resurrection in the Gospels and spend some time imagining yourself as one of the characters in the accounts. Imagine yourself as Mary or one of the other women going to the tomb early Sunday morning expecting a dead body and finding an empty tomb. Put yourself in the sandals of Peter and John holding a foot race to see who could reach the tomb first. And – FYI - there is lots of great artwork out there that can assist those of you who are visual learners.

Spend the weeks of Ordinary Time this summer reading all the passages on Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God and look for evidence of how it's already here and not yet here. Keep a journal and write down where you see it in this world and what you hope it will be like in the world to come.

Study how the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost. Listen for the ways the Spirit guides you to do things (things like making a phone call or visiting someone; babysitting for a busy Mom or any one of a thousand other things) and then do it. I promise you that the more you listen for and obey the Holy Spirit, the more you will hear the Holy Spirit.

Keep hope alive through prayer and conversation about how Christ is at work in the world and stay busy for God's kingdom with the sweet knowledge that Christ will come again. Speak words of life and truth to one another – it's a great way to keep one another accountable. If you need inspiration, go back and listen to Pastor Clang's sermon "Say what you need to say."

And another important point to keep in mind is what Luke tells us in verse 50 of chapter 24: Christ lifted up His hands in blessing as He ascended. If you visit the ruins of Byzantine churches around modern day Turkey, you will find in the midst of them partial images of frescoes. You can, if you look closely, see images of a popular icon: Christ with wide eye, raised arm and fingers curled in constellation. It's Christ the Lord giving His blessing to a ruined church.

When we pray prayers like the one in Paul's letter to the Ephesians – giving thanks; asking for spiritual wisdom and revelation; praying for enlightened hearts and a knowledge of the hope to which He has called us – God will work among the ruins and, in the words of author Barbara Brown Taylor bring about raising the dead kind of stuff. What amazing power and grace.

To God be the glory. Amen.