

What Does the Ascension Mean?

Acts 1:1-11

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“He ascended into heaven.” That simple statement may raise various questions: What does that mean? Where did Jesus go? How did he get there? What does it mean for us?

To ascend is to go up. An ascension is the act of going up. Did Jesus actually go up into the sky and fly away somewhere? The problem with seeing him as literally going up is that what’s up for someone on one side of the world is down for someone else. But we can talk about people going up in different ways. In just a couple of weeks, a lot of students will go up to the next grade. That doesn’t necessarily mean their classrooms will be on a higher floor. Executives can be promoted and we say they are going up in the company. Again, that doesn’t necessarily mean their offices are farther from the ground.

The “going up,” the ascension of Jesus, affirms his lordship, his rule. He is not really being promoted or advancing; he’s being affirmed and proclaimed as Lord. Jesus goes into heaven, into the spiritual and unseen dimension of creation, into God’s “space.” In fact, Jesus has been in that heavenly dimension since his resurrection. He has appeared to the disciples from heaven several times. People tend to think of heaven as “up”—it’s “higher” or better. So we say Jesus went up when we talk about how he went into heaven.

In Luke’s writings, Jesus’ ascension marks the end of Jesus’ physical ministry and the beginning of the church’s ministry. Here in Acts 1, the ascension comes at the end of forty days of appearances by the risen Jesus to his disciples. He has been teaching them about God’s kingdom. He has told them to wait for God’s promise of the Holy Spirit. Then he was taken out of their sight into a cloud.

Clouds in the Bible often are a sign of God’s presence. This helps us see that Jesus entered into the heavenly dimension. The time of the disciples seeing him in the flesh was over. The time for him to be present in and with them in the Holy Spirit was soon to come.

Still, they stood looking into the sky, wondering where he went and when he would return. Suddenly two angels warn them not to spend their time gazing into the sky. The angels assure the disciples that “this same Jesus” will come back. The implication is that he won’t come back immediately. But with the assurance that he will return, they can leave the future to God. They can leave their sky-gazing and get on with the mission Jesus gave them.

So we have a definition and a description of the ascension. We’ve seen it in context. But we still need to know what it means. What does it tell us about Jesus and how does it affect us?

I want to suggest four things that the ascension means or that it tells us. The ascension means that Jesus is Lord. It means that Jesus gives the Holy Spirit. It means that Jesus intercedes for us. And it means that Jesus will return. Let’s look at each of those.

The ascension means that Jesus is Lord. In the next chapter of Acts, the apostle Peter declares, “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (2:36). Through crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, God has exalted Jesus. When we talk about Jesus being at God’s “right hand,” we’re talking about Jesus ruling in the position of greatest power and authority. All through the New Testament, Jesus is called “Lord.” “Jesus Christ is Lord” is likely the earliest Christian confession of faith. That short statement summarizes the entire gospel. The name *Jesus* means Savior. The title *Christ* means Messiah, Anointed One, God’s specially set apart leader. *Lord* means ruler, the one who’s in charge.

In the days of the early church, to make the confession that Jesus is Lord meant forsaking all kinds of other gods and loyalties. In the Roman Empire, the emperor was regarded as “lord and god” and sometimes as “savior.” At some times, in some places in the empire, people were required to pledge their loyalty to the empire and to the emperor by affirming, “Caesar is lord.” Christians would not do this because they believed only Jesus is Lord. Their refusal often cost them their lives.

We’re not faced with the same sort of pressure to affirm another lord that the early Christians faced. But we are called to claim and confess Jesus as our Lord. And when we do that, it means we put all our other loyalties

under his rule. If Jesus is Lord, no one and nothing else is lord—no power, no possession, no status, no leader, no political party, no nation, nor anything else that demands our loyalty. All of those things must serve the true Lord. We do not finally give our allegiance to anything less than God who is present and active in Jesus Christ our Lord.

He does rule. Jesus rules in heaven. But he rules here as well. It may not always seem like it. The world is still a mess even though Jesus has inaugurated God's kingdom and has begun to rule. In the ascension, Jesus Christ has been exalted to the highest honor and glory possible and he fills the whole universe with his presence. He rules over all, he is present everywhere, and he is accessible to everyone everywhere all the time. In this time we live in, he calls us not just to live under his rule but also to help extend his rule into the whole world. We do that through witness and service and godly lives in every area of life.

That brings us to something else the ascension means. It means that Jesus gives the Holy Spirit. Again, Peter says, "Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear" (the events of Pentecost) (Acts 2:33).

The ideas of Jesus' resurrection victory over death and his ascending to sit at God's right hand in power meet at Pentecost when Christ's life and power are given to the disciples through the Holy Spirit. Jesus has ascended, "God has gone up," not gone away from the church but gone up to be the church's empowerment (Will Willimon, *Acts: Interpretation Commentary*). Jesus' exaltation and rule in heaven lead to the church's empowerment to do the mission Jesus gives us to do.

Puccini was one of the greatest composers of Italian opera. He began his last opera, *Turandot*, as he was dying of cancer, and he died before it was completed. There is a legend that one of his last words to a student was, "Remember *Turandot*." After his death, the opera was completed, and its premier performance was on April 25, 1926. Toscanini, the greatest conductor of the time, was on the podium. At the end of the first scene in the third act, Toscanini stopped the performance, laid down his baton, turned to the audience and said, "Here the performance finishes because at

this point the maestro died." And they left it at that. Then, the next evening, they performed the entire opera as it was completed by Puccini's students.

We come to a point when we announce that our Master died. But unlike Puccini, Jesus lives again and he gives us his Spirit so he can continue his work through us. "The ascension is not the end of the life of Jesus but is the beginning of the life of the church" (James A. Harnish, *Believe in Me* 60; also see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turandot>).

We are called and empowered to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ. What a ministry that is! What a Lord we serve!

The ascension also means that Jesus intercedes for us. The book of Hebrews calls attention to the fact that Jesus, as our high priest, sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven (8:1). The priests of the old covenant had to stand and offer sacrifices every day. Jesus offered one sacrifice—himself—once and for all. He is seated because his work of redemption is complete.

Hebrews also says, "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives *to intercede for them*" (7:25). Jesus is with God as our advocate—interceding for us, pleading our case, praying for us, speaking on our behalf. It's not that God doesn't want to hear from us and Jesus somehow persuades him to listen to us. This is simply another way of describing how we come to God through Jesus Christ.

There's a story about a soldier in the Union Army, a young man who had lost his older brother and his father in the war. He went to Washington, DC to see President Lincoln and to ask for an exemption from military service so he could go back and help his sister and mother with the spring planting on the farm. He got a furlough and went to the White House where he asked to see the president. However, he was told, "You can't see the president! Don't you know there's a war on? The president's a very busy man. Now go away, son! Get back out there and fight like you're supposed to."

So he left, disheartened, and sat on a park bench not far from the White House. A little boy came up to him and said, "Soldier, you look sad. What's wrong?" For some reason the soldier spilled out his heart to the boy

about his situation, about his father and brother having died in the war, and how he was the only male left in his family and was needed desperately back at the farm for the spring planting.

The little boy took the soldier by the hand and led him around to the back of the White House. They went through the back door, past the guards, past all the generals and the high ranking government officials until they got to the president's office. The little boy didn't even knock on the door but just walked in. There was President Lincoln with his secretary of state, looking over battle plans on the desk. President Lincoln looked up and said, "What can I do for you, Todd?"

And Todd said, "Daddy, this soldier needs to talk to you." And right then and there the soldier had a chance to plead his case to President Lincoln, and he was exempted from military service due to his hardship.

We have access to the Father through the Son. The Son of God brings us to the Father's throne and says, "Daddy, here is someone who wants to talk to you" (*Illustrations Unlimited* 72-73).

There for me the Savior stands
shows his wounds and spreads his hands
God is love! I know, I feel
Jesus weeps and loves me still

(Charles Wesley, "Depth of Mercy," *UM Hymnal* #355)

I mentioned last week that the bodily resurrection of Jesus affirms his incarnation, that he became, *and remains*, fully human. It's not that he stopped being God and became human for a while, then went back to being God in the ascension. The resurrected, ascended, exalted Jesus is still fully God and fully human. He takes our humanity into heaven, God's place, God's presence. And when we are in relationship with him through faith, he takes each of us there. Paul writes about how "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6). And, he says, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is

now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:1-4).

The ascension means that Jesus will return. The ascension marked the end of Jesus' resurrection appearances to the disciples (unless you count the one to Saul on the road to Damascus). He no longer appears visibly and physically like that. We relate to him now through the Holy Spirit, in prayer and sacraments and loving and serving others. But some day he will appear again. The angels told the disciples, "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). As he disappeared into the cloud of God's glory, he will appear again in glory. At that time, "every eye will see him" (Revelation 1:7). I don't know how that will work, but I trust God is able to take care of it. The invisible heavenly dimension will become visible. The two dimensions of creation will no longer be separated, but will be united and made new—"a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1).

Believing that Jesus will come again, we have hope. Faith in Christ gives us hope. We are not bound to the past. We are not limited to the present. We have a future. We are forward-looking. History does not just keep cycling around. It does not continue indefinitely with no direction. History will come to a conclusion. It will reach the goal God has for it. The Lord of history is our Lord Jesus Christ. The One we meet at the end of all things is the One we have come to know and love by faith now.

The Apostles' Creed says, "He will come to judge the living and the dead." I understand Christ's return to be the judgment. When he appears again, those who have come to know and love him will be ready to welcome him. They will be caught up in his glory, transformed and made like him when they see him as he is. Those who have rejected and resisted him all their lives will not welcome him. They will be consumed by his glory. The love that would have filled and fulfilled them will instead, like waves crashing on a rock, simply beat upon the door they have pulled shut from the inside.

Now, another meaning of "judge" is "to put right." Christ's coming again will mean separation of people, but it will also put things right. Creation will be restored to God's original intention. Injustice will be gone.

Violence will end. Unjust suffering will be changed into glory. Bondage will give way to ultimate liberation. That's our hope. That's what we trust our incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended Lord to do.

Have you experienced Jesus as Savior? Have you surrendered to him as Lord? Have you received the gift of the Holy Spirit? Are you committed to God's mission? Can you come with confidence to God in prayer? Are you living as one whose life is in Christ? Do you have the blessed hope of being with Jesus when he appears again in glory?