

Acts 1:8–14, “Up, Down, Pray in Town”

5/24/20, Seventh Sunday of Easter, The Ascension of our Lord

Pastor Alex Amiot

Acts 1:8–14 (NKJV)

<sup>8</sup> But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

<sup>9</sup> Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup> And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, <sup>11</sup> who also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This *same* Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”

<sup>12</sup> Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey. <sup>13</sup> And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James *the son* of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas *the son* of James. <sup>14</sup> These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

In Acts chapter one, what did Jesus do? What will He do? And what should you do? These three questions are answered in our text from Acts 1:8–14. The sermon title also answers these three questions briefly, “Up, Down, Pray in Town.”

Look at Acts 1:9. The disciples were standing there listening to Jesus and watching Him. Then it says, “[Jesus] was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.” In short, what did Jesus do? He went up!

Look at Acts 1:11. The disciples were still standing there and looking up to where they had just seen Jesus ascend and disappear behind a cloud. Then angels appear and say, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This *same* Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.” In short, what will Jesus do? He’ll come back down!

Look at Acts 1:12. It says that the disciples went down from the Mount of Olives and returned to town—to Jerusalem. Verse fourteen says they continued all together in prayer. In short, Jesus went up, He will come down, and while they waited for the soon-to-come Holy Spirit and the eventual return of Christ, the disciples went to pray in town.

For each of these three scenes, Christ’s ascension, His promised return, and the disciples’ devotion to prayer, we’ll ask a “why” question and a “what” question. First, why did Jesus go up? Why did He gloriously ascend into heaven?

Our Lord came in the most humble and lowly manner in the incarnation in Mary’s womb, in His impoverished birth at Christmas, in His ministry when the foxes and birds had more

permanent homes than He did, in His innocent suffering and death. He came humbly in order to let only God's Word attract people and not His own appearance, and to obediently endure suffering and death for our salvation by the "determined purpose and foreknowledge of God," as Acts 2:23 says.

But His resurrection on the third day and His ascension 40 days later were public displays for all who were in heaven, on earth, and under the earth to show that Jesus is Lord of all. His resurrection was a necessary result after His death since His self-sacrifice on the cross was accepted by God and was sufficient to cover our sins. He is risen!

His ascension into heaven was necessary to show that He is seated in the position of all authority—at God's right hand. Jesus also went up to heaven so that He could send the Holy Spirit 10 days later.

Pentecost wouldn't have happened without Christ ascending into heaven. Because He ascended and sent His Holy Spirit, now His presence with us isn't just seeing Him here or there like the disciples did in His earthly ministry. Now it's better. His presence will always and forever be with us in an uninterrupted way because He and the Father sent God the Holy Spirit on Pentecost to dwell in our hearts by faith.

Jesus told the disciples about how He would send the Holy Spirit to them, though He didn't tell them that they would only have to wait 10 days. In Acts 1:8 He said, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

If He hadn't ascended to the Father, the Holy Spirit wouldn't have descended to us. That answers the "why" question. So now, "what" does Jesus going up mean for us?

This Ascension Sunday is enormously significant for your life as a Christian. Jesus is with you and in you who live in repentance and faith. How can Jesus be in you? Because He who lived for you and died for you and rose for you also ascended into heaven so that He would send His Holy Spirit for you.

So first, Jesus went up. Acts 1:9 says, "Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight." Why did he go up? Because His work on earth was finished and because He was returning to His position of all power and authority—the position of being at God's right hand.

This is not merely a physical position, since Jesus is God and everywhere present. It's a position of authority so that wherever He is, which is everywhere, He has the power and authority of God's right hand.

And what's the benefit for you of Him going up? The benefit for you who believe is that because Jesus ascended, He subsequently sent the Holy Spirit who dwells in the hearts of all who believe and are baptized.

Second, Jesus will come back down. Acts 1:10 says, "And while [the disciples] looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel,<sup>11</sup> who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This *same* Jesus,

who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”

What a great question: “Why do you stand gazing up into heaven?” Well I would guess they were gazing into heaven still because they just saw Jesus in the flesh rise off of the ground, float up in the air, and keep going up until He went behind a cloud.

This is new! They’d never seen anything like it! So there they stand, staring. And to these astounded disciples the angels give the reminder of the promise of Christ’s return. They said, “This *same* Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.” In other words: He went up; He’ll be coming down.

Why will He return? He’ll return to judge the world in righteousness as we heard Paul tell the Athenians in last week’s reading from Acts chapter seventeen. Acts 17:30–31 says, “[God] commands all men everywhere to repent,<sup>31</sup> because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

As we say in the Creed, Christ “ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from where He shall come to judge the living and the dead.” He has gone up and He will come down. What does His return mean for you?

Be ready. How? Repent. Live in repentance and faith. Do you hide your sins from people? Don’t try to hide them from God. Psalm 66:18 says, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear.” In other words, if I hold on to my sin and try to pretend like it’s no big deal and go on without confessing it to God, “the Lord will not hear.” This is what Jesus meant when He said that many will say “Lord, Lord,” and He will tell them, “Depart from me, I never knew you.”

Jesus is the one who died for your sins. Don’t hide from Him and continue in unrepentance. Repent today, because you may not have tomorrow. He has gone up, and He will come down. He is coming soon.

To humble us in our sin and pride, His return is a sobering word of Law. But to you who repent and believe you are forgiven by God on account of Jesus Christ. To the humble hearted, the promise of His return is a joyful word of comfort.

Think of those dumbfounded disciples on the Mount of Olives, staring up at the cloud that just hid Jesus from their sight. They loved Jesus. They relied on Him. And now He was gone again. The promise from the angels that Jesus would return came as a sweet comfort. “Oh yeah, that’s right. He said that if He goes to prepare a place for us, He’ll come again and take us to His Father’s House.”

He went up and He will come down. Why up? His work was finished and He needed to make way for Pentecost. Why down? He will return to judge the living and the dead. What does His return mean for you? It means that today you need to be ready. Live in repentance and faith, trusting not in your own works but in the finished work of Christ for you.

Third, the disciples went to pray in town. Acts 1:14 says, “These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.”

Why did they pray in town? This is the direction Jesus gave them in Acts 1:4 which says, “[Jesus] commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father.” That’s why they were in town, but why were they praying? They were praying because they trusted their Heavenly Father to help them. They brought their requests and cries before Him, confident that they were being heard because they weren’t praying based on their own goodness, but with humble hearts that trusted in Christ and prayed in His name alone.

I already read Psalm 66:18 which says, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear.” But the very next verse says, “But certainly God has heard me; He has attended to the voice of my prayer.”

The disciples were praying because that’s what Christians do. We repent of our sins, we believe in Jesus for our forgiveness, and we make our requests known to the Father in the name of Jesus His Son. Certainly God has heard you, dear Christian. He has attended to the voice of your prayer. Keep praying.

The work that the disciples had to do during the 10 day period between Christ’s ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was to pray. Prayer is a Christian’s primary work. Of course there’s a lot else to do for your neighbors, but do all things in a spirit of prayer.

The Lord gives us all unique vocations, unique callings that change over time and sometimes change throughout the day. He gives us vocations for the purpose of identifying our neighbors and giving us work to do as Christians. It was the disciples’ job to wait and pray. If you find yourself doing a lot of waiting while the pandemic is ongoing, pray. Just as the disciples prayed, waiting for the Holy Spirit to come, you pray, waiting for Jesus to come.

But we don’t just stand on a hill gawking up to the clouds waiting for Him to come back. “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven?” the angels said. They had work to do in the meantime while they waited for Him to return.

You do too. As you pray continually, love and serve the neighbors God gives you in your family, your congregation, your job, your physical neighborhood, and anywhere else that God puts a neighbor before you to love and serve in the name of Jesus.

This way when Jesus returns He won’t find us flatfooted with our talents buried in the field, with our eyes looking at the clouds but our hands idle. Raise those hands to heaven and start to pray. Use those hands to love and serve your neighbors.

As you give thanks for Jesus going up, and look forward to Him coming down, and remember how the disciples went and prayed in town, may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.