



Temple Baptist Church
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Our Ascended Lord
Luke 24:36-53; Acts 1:1-11

On the Christian calendar, this past Thursday, May 25, was Ascension Day—the day that marks Jesus’ return to heaven forty days after his resurrection. So this morning, we’re focusing on Jesus as *our ascended Lord*.

Maybe that’s new for you. And I have to be honest and admit that until just a few years ago, I’d always dealt with the ascension as part of the larger Easter story rather than focusing on it and its theological significance.

In one of her books, Marva Dawn observes how “Ascension Day is the perfect church holiday because the world can’t steal it.” She laments that the culture has ruined Christmas and Easter, seizing them both for its own idolatrous consumeristic purposes. Dawn remembers how at her hometown’s Christmas parade Santa Claus was always flown in by helicopter. Later, they flew in the Easter bunny as well. Then she declares, “But the world hasn’t got the foggiest notion what to do with someone flying out.”¹ Sometimes we Christians don’t either!

So what are we to make of Jesus’ ascension into heaven? Two ancient Christian confessions of faith (commonly known as the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds) expressed “the rule of faith”—the central affirmations about who Jesus is and what he has done. They served as the lens through which the Scriptures must be interpreted and by which beliefs and behavior must be formed and judged. Both include the affirmation that after Jesus suffered and died, he rose from the dead and ascended to heaven where he sits at the Father’s right hand, and that he will return in glory to judge the living and the dead.

It’s clear that the Scriptures teach us that Jesus ascended into heaven after his resurrection. And these early confessions affirm its significance by including it in what they express as being essential to the Christian faith.

So what happened, and why is it significant?

What happened?

Luke really gives us more details in his two-volume account (Luke and Acts) about Jesus’ ascension than any of the other Gospel writers. Matthew doesn’t specifically mention it. The ending of the Gospel according to Mark (16:9-20), though not included in the earliest manuscripts we have, gives one sentence to it. In John’s account, Jesus talks about ascending and going to the Father, but his actual ascension is not reported.

Luke, on the other hand, tells us in Luke 24 how the risen Lord Jesus appeared to his disciples. They thought they were seeing a ghost, so he showed them his hands and feet and invited them to touch him and see, since a ghost has no flesh or bones, as he does. In their joy and amazement, they still had trouble believing it, so he asked for something to eat. They gave him some broiled fish and he ate it in their presence, demonstrating that he was neither a ghost

nor an angel, since neither of these eat—only a *physical* being eats! He was real, he was alive. He was the same Jesus they had known before, only he had died and had been raised from the dead! As Charles Talbert puts it, “Jesus remained flesh and bones, though immortal and not limited by time and space.”²

Once that was settled, Jesus reminded them how he had explained to them from the Scriptures, which he now opened their minds to understand, how the Christ must suffer and rise from the dead, and how ***repentance for the forgiveness of sins*** must be ***preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem*** (Luke 24:46-47).³

Then he told them that they were witnesses of these things, and that he was going to send them what his Father had promised—the Holy Spirit. But they were to stay in Jerusalem until they had been clothed with power from on high. That, of course, would happen ten days later at Pentecost.

Then Jesus ***led them out to the vicinity of Bethany*** (Luke 24:50). In biblical times, Bethany was a small village on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, less than two miles from Jerusalem. The Kidron Valley lies between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. Bethany was on the road that came from Jericho, and Jesus often stopped there. You remember that his dear friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived there. There’s a church on the Mount of Olives that commemorates Jesus’ ascension. It was from somewhere in that area that Jesus ascended.

Luke tells us that when Jesus had led the disciples to this area, ***he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven*** (Luke 25:50-51). Then the disciples worshiped him and went back to Jerusalem with great joy, and stayed at the temple praising God.

In his second volume, Acts, Luke begins by elaborating on Jesus’ command to his disciples to stay in Jerusalem waiting for the gift from the Father that he had promised—the baptism of the Holy Spirit that John the Baptist had declared the Christ (Messiah) would bring.

It’s interesting that at this point the disciples somehow still think Jesus is about restoring Israel as an earthly dominion. ***Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*** (Acts 1:6). But then after all, he had once said something to them about their sitting on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel . . .

Jesus’ reply basically said that this was none of their business. They were concerned about receiving power. They would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them, and then they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7-8)!

And then, Luke tells us, ***After he had said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight*** (Acts 1:9). It was just that sudden!

They kept looking up into the sky as he was going up. But ***suddenly two men dressed in white*** (angels, of course) ***stood beside them*** and told them (Acts 1:10-11):

Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? 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.

And so he had ascended.

Why is it significant?

But what is the significance of Jesus’ ascension?

J. I. Packer has aptly described it as “part two (the Resurrection being part one) of Jesus’

return from the depths of death to the height of glory.” He points out how Paul celebrated the ascension and “affirmed Christ’s consequent lordship (Eph. 1:20; 4:8-10; Phil 2:9-11; 1 Tim. 3:16), and the writer of Hebrews applied this truth for encouragement of the fainthearted (Heb. 1:3; 4:14; 9:24). The fact that Jesus Christ is enthroned as master of the universe should be of enormous encouragement to all believers.”⁴

Then Packer says:

The Ascension was from one standpoint the restoration of the glory that the Son had before the Incarnation, from another the glorifying of human nature in a way that had never happened before, and from a third the start of a reign that had not previously been exercised in this form.⁵

Think about that for a minute. Luke went to great lengths to make it clear that the Jesus who ascended into heaven to sit at the Father’s right hand is the same Jesus who became incarnate when he was born of the virgin Mary, the same Jesus who lived and ministered in a specific time and place, the same Jesus who suffered and died and rose again, the same Messiah spoken of by the prophets of the Old Testament, and the same Lord who will return to judge the living and the dead. He was born truly and fully God and truly and fully human; he lived, ministered, suffered, died and rose again as the God-Man. And when he ascended, he did so as the divine-human Lord Jesus the Messiah and Son of God, so that even at the Father’s right hand he is truly God, truly Man.

According to Charles Talbert, most of the earliest Christians understood Jesus’ resurrection to encompass “three different realities: (1) Jesus’ victory over death; (2) his removal from human time and space into another dimension (that of God); and (3) his new function as cosmic Lord.”⁶ He goes on to point out how in Luke and Acts, Luke breaks these three realities into

three separate events on a chronological time line. (1) The resurrection of Jesus is reduced to the reality of his victory over death. (2) The ascension becomes Jesus’ removal to heaven. (3) The exaltation designates the moment of Jesus’ new status as Lord and Christ.

By focusing on the parts of the unified whole, Luke focuses on the meaning of each aspect.⁷

So what does it mean for us?

So what does the ascension of Jesus mean for us as followers of Jesus today?

To declare that Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at the Father’s right hand is to affirm at least three things.

First, it means that *Jesus reigns*. As early Christians looked to what the Old Testament said about Jesus, one of the passages they looked to was Psalm 110:1—

***The LORD says to my Lord:
“Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.”***

From the Father's right hand, Jesus reigns. This is, of course, the position of highest honor. But that's not all it signifies. J. I. Packer says that the image here is that of the Grand Vizier in the ancient Persian royal court sitting on a throne at the right hand of the king. In this position he occupied "the position of executive ruler on the monarch's behalf . . ." ⁸ The Lord Jesus reigns with all authority in heaven and on earth that has been given to him (Matthew 28:18). And because he reigns, he is *Lord*, Lord over all his creation, Lord over humanity—whether we bow to him or not—and Lord over the lives of those who trust him and submit their lives to him. To him we owe our absolute allegiance, loyalty, and obedience!

Jesus' ascension also means that *he intercedes for us*. Let that sink in. Paul in Romans 8:34 and the writer of Hebrews in 7:25 and 9:24 declare that in heaven at the Father's right hand, Jesus intercedes for us—he *prays* for us and intervenes in our circumstances! In 1 John 2:1, John tells us that if we as followers of Jesus commit sin, ***we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One***. He pleads our case on the basis of his righteousness and what he has done on our behalf!

Finally, Jesus' ascension means that *he will return* in glory to raise the dead and to judge the living and the dead. The angels told his disciples who saw him ascend, ***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). Just as certainly and as suddenly as he departed, he will return. And when he does, just as we have denied ourselves, taken up our cross daily, and followed him (Luke 9:23), he will raise us just as he was raised, and we'll be caught up to meet him in the air to be with him forever (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Jesus reigns, he intercedes, and he will return. He is our risen, ascended Lord who prays for us and will come again to raise us and take us to be with him forever.

There's one other thing we need to notice about the event of Jesus' ascension—his command to *wait*. He told his disciples to wait for the Spirit and to wait for his return. The Spirit was given at Pentecost, but we must wait on his empowerment and enablement to do God's will as we wait for Jesus to return.

The question is, are we waiting?

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

² Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 257.

³ Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (2011 edition).

⁴ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 127.

⁵ Packer, 127.

⁶ Talbert, 255.

⁷ Talbert, 255.

⁸ Packer, 128.