

An Uplifting Experience

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, May 5th. Now, if today were actually yesterday, I would be saying to you, may the 4th be with you. And a friend of mine said, because you're a pastor, you should also say, and also with you, shouldn't you?

And I said, ah, very liturgical, cute. So my name is Kent Dixon, and it's my joy to be the pastor here. Welcome here this morning. So we're continuing in our sermon series, Acts to All the World. And through this series, we're exploring, not surprisingly, the New Testament book of Acts. So let me read again, Acts 1, verses 7 to 10. He said to them, it is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. Men of Galilee, they said. Why do you stand here looking into the sky?

[1 : 13] This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way that you have seen him go into heaven. So we focus on the birth of Christ at Christmas.

Right? Not a shock. We focus on his death and resurrection. We're still in that post-Easter season, as you can see. At Easter time, we focus on those.

And those are key events that we recognize in our faith as Christians. But I've also challenged us over the years to not think of those things in isolation.

Because the significance of Christmas, guess what? Echoes throughout the year and into eternity. The events of Easter, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, echo beyond that first Easter time. It wasn't even called Easter, right? So those are not limited in their significance. Jesus' birth and the resurrection and the details surrounding those events are essential beliefs and doctrines of our faith.

[2 : 22] They have significance beyond the seasons in which we recognize them. But what about the ascension of Jesus? It's something we rarely hear sermons about.

I've never heard one as I was preparing this. And I've lived a long time. But I don't ever recall hearing a pastor say, what about that ascension?

Because people just go, well, yeah, it was in there somewhere, I think. But we seem to gloss over that event. We rarely even, if ever, talk about it. But it is a critical part of the story that we don't tend to focus on, right?

We either gloss over it or seem to minimize it, maybe because we don't completely understand it. Maybe we don't recognize its significance. Is it really important?

Isn't it just like, yeah, Jesus was born in a stable. There might have been a donkey. I don't know. Does it matter? Does the ascension matter? Yeah, it does. So why does it matter?

[3 : 25] When we speak of the finished work of Christ on the cross, typically we focus on his atonement, that fancy theological word that means paying the price for our sins.

We focus on his resurrection from the dead. And these works are absolutely at the heart of the work of redemption. But what about that event that occurred 40 days after Jesus came out of the tomb?

It's called the ascension. The ascension of Jesus is recounted in detail in the books of Luke and Acts, as well as being highlighted lots of other places in the New Testament.

The books of Matthew, Mark, and John, the other gospels include references to it. It's also mentioned as a significant event in Paul's writing, in Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, 1 Timothy, 1 Peter.

Is it important, do you think? Maybe? So how important is this doctrine for our salvation? Does it have practical implications? Do we tend to neglect it as we consider the many aspects of Christ's work?

[4 : 39] Yes, I'm going to suggest that we do. So let's start with the basics as we consider this together this morning. What does ascension mean?

Well, the word ascension means two things, two definitions I'll give you. The act of changing location in an upward direction. Or the act of rising to an important position or a higher level. So someone may ascend this morning to the very important role of helping Vern and Kathy put the stuff away. And that's an important ascension in higher level of important position.

So it's also interesting to me to note that when I did this definition research, the Oxford English Dictionary references the journey of Jesus from the earth into heaven as part of its definition. Interesting, right? The Oxford English Dictionary thinks that is significant. Hmm. So as Jesus was speaking with the apostles, as we heard this morning, he was taken up before their very eyes.

[5 : 46] So from our definition of ascension this morning, the act of changing location in an upward direction? Check. The Bible tells us that this event, Christ's ascension, happened 40 days after Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus was crucified and came back from the dead three days later. But ultimately, he left. And not just in a figurative way or a metaphorical way, Jesus literally left the earth.

So what does this mean that Jesus Christ ascended? What's the significance of that? Not just when it actually happened, but how.

And now, what is the significance of it for us? So let's unpack that a little more in detail. So first of all, it's always helpful. You know me, I always say, well, let's look to what the Bible says.

But better than that, let's look to what Jesus said about his own ascension. Speaking to Nicodemus the Pharisee in John 3, verse 13, Jesus said, No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man.

[7 : 00] In John 7, verse 33, we read, Jesus said, I am with you only for a short time. And then I am going to the one who sent me.

In John 14, verses 2 to 4, Jesus said, My Father's house has many rooms. If that were not so, would I have told you that I'm going there to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you may also be where I am. You know the way to the place I am going, Jesus said.

In John 14, verse 12, Jesus said, Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing. And they will do even greater things than me, than these, because I am going to the Father, Jesus says.

Just after the resurrection, when Mary Magdalene was with Jesus, she interacted with him. We read in John 20, verse 17, Jesus said, Do not hold on to me.

[8 : 06] For I have not yet ascended to the Father, Jesus says. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

Jesus had told his apostles and his closest companions that he would be leaving. He was clear and consistent about this message, over and over and over.

But they didn't seem to get that he meant literally. So perhaps this is partly why the angels appeared to the apostles immediately after Jesus' ascension.

They see them staring up into the sky and essentially say, What are you guys looking at? Perhaps the most central question of the doctrine of the ascension is, Why did Jesus have to leave?

Have you ever thought of that? I had never thought of it and started to ponder it. So what was the significance of that historical event? Not just for the apostles in the early church, but for Christians today and into the future.

[9 : 15] Well, first of all, Jesus was always clear that he would return one day. We hear that over and over. If you've ever intended to come back to a place, it's pretty important to have left in the first place, right?

And I'm not even joking. All kidding aside, there was a definite change of location that was required. When you go on vacation, you mourn coming back from vacation and want to go on vacation again. You see the importance of transition and change of location there. So for Christ to return and fulfill God's ultimate plan, first, he needed to leave.

Maybe that's not something you've ever really thought about, never considered. But couldn't Jesus, as I touched on a second ago, couldn't he have just stayed on earth?

Did he really need to leave? Right? Have you ever thought of that? That's not even a rhetorical question. You can nod, you can shake your head, you can say, Pastor Kent has lost his mind again, he must be on his allergy medication.

[10:24] But when Jesus said, it is finished on the cross, didn't that really mean that his work was complete? Couldn't he have just stuck around?

Right? Does that, as the son of God, with an immortal and eternal body, couldn't he have just stayed with his people on earth? Have you ever thought of that?

Couldn't he have just been here in person the whole time to lead us? Wouldn't that have been easier in a lot of ways? But, could you imagine the chaos that could have potentially caused? Imagine the claims of churches and ministries around the world that, well, Jesus was here last week, and I'm telling you, this is what he told me. Oh, he didn't visit you? Oh, that's too bad for you, because he did visit us.

Did I mention that? We see so much pride and conflict in the church the way it is now, and that's without Jesus being here for us or for someone to brag about it.

[11:31] So, second, Jesus promised he was going to prepare a place for us, because this, I hope you're thinking an amen when I say this, this is not our home.

We're God's children, folks, and one day we will be with him. John 14, verse 1 to 4 says, as Jesus is comforting his disciples before his crucifixion, Jesus always thought of other people.

Let's hear this again. Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God. Believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms. If that were not so, would I have told you that I'm going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you may also be where I am.

You know the place where I am going, Jesus said. In John 14, verse 2, when Jesus says, my Father's house, there are many rooms and dwelling places there, Jesus says.

[12:44] And his point was that plans have been made to secure a place for all believers with him in heaven. You've got a spot, folks.

So this was another reason that the disciples should not let their hearts be troubled that Jesus was leaving. Jesus had to leave to complete God's mission for him, but also to prepare a way for others to follow, to come with him, to follow him into eternity one day.

Third, Jesus had to leave so that the Holy Spirit could come. We see that in Scripture. The Holy Spirit would come and usher in the church on earth in the way God had always planned.

Jesus himself had told the disciples it was good for him to go away. John 16, verses 7 to 16 says that. Because only then would Jesus send another helper.

And we've talked about the Holy Spirit in the last few weeks. The Spirit of Truth. And that's exactly what happened at Pentecost 10 days after Jesus' ascension.

[13:54] Do you see? The ascension was a critical point there. The Spirit descended on the church with power, ushering in a new age in the history of salvation.

The Spirit came specifically to guide, to lead, to empower God's people in the next chapter of God's story. And the work of the Holy Spirit that we see in Acts we're going to get to over the weeks needed to be done in the absence of Jesus' literal presence.

So fourth, Jesus' ultimate place is at the right hand of God. He was sent here. He did not belong here.

He was never intended to stay here. He needed to return to where he had come from to complete his mission. It is finished, started the final chapter.

But the ascension brought it next, into the next stage. He had to return to where he had come from to complete his mission. And in returning, Jesus also had the full glory and authority that he is due as the Son of God.

[15:08] That was, to some extent, minimized during his time on earth. So he needed to return to have that mantle restored to him. Jesus ascended, and remember the definition from earlier.

He changed location in an upward direction and also to a position that is important, a position of higher authority.

So having accomplished redemption through his suffering on the cross, the risen and exalted Christ now applies the salvation he has won. He now meets it back, delivers it to us, shares it with us.

By granting the gifts of repentance and forgiveness of sin. You see that? That's the completion of that transaction. Jesus' death and resurrection were central to his victory over sin and death. But so are that next chapter, his ascension and his return. The ascension reminds us that the victory we have in the gospel is secure, but that it hasn't been fully applied yet.

[16:20] Does that make sense? So God's complete plan of salvation for all creation is still playing out right now. So what does ascension mean for us today?

Today, today, but also tomorrow and the next day. The ascension of Jesus reminds us that Jesus is risen. Remember, Easter's not just one weekend.

Our faith in Jesus, God's promises to us are true and our trust in him is secure. The ascension of Jesus ensured that the Holy Spirit would come to guide and direct Christ's church on earth and that the Spirit would live within everyone who has received Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

So through the Holy Spirit, we have resurrection power, and we talked about that a few weeks ago, to encourage and sustain us as we seek God's will for our lives and as we seek to share the truth of the gospel of Jesus with the world.

The ascension of Jesus made a way. Through Jesus' own resurrection, we have hope of resurrection as well. You see that? There's the promise.

[17:37] We have hope for resurrection both for ourselves, our brothers and sisters, and also for loved ones who have died in Christ.

Take a moment to think of the inventory of people who are waiting for you in heaven. The ascension of Jesus reminds us that Jesus is also seated at the right hand of the Father. not metaphorically, but literally right now. Jesus is also interceding for us with the Father. His grace and his sacrifice have redeemed us and cover all our sins. Jesus has made it possible for us to have a relationship with the Father.

God's grace and he has been reminded that Jesus ascended. He returned to where he came from and he is who he said he was.

[18:36] He has been given what God promised that he would receive, power and authority. He has gone ahead of us to advocate on our behalf with God and he will return again one day to complete God's story and to bring us all home.

As author Tim Keller says, the ascension when understood becomes an irreplaceable important resource for living our lives in the world and it's a resource no other religion or philosophy of life holds out to us.

an irreplaceable important resource for living our lives in the world. In some ways the ascension seems to play right into the skeptics darkest doubts about the gospel narrative.

Have you ever thought about that? How convenient that the supposedly risen Messiah should vanish without showing himself to anyone other than his friends and family.

Maybe it's a fair point. But the Bible refuses to agree with that argument. Far from treating the ascension as a weird stage exit oh I'm gonna go now the main function of that being to explain why Jesus isn't around anymore right?

[20:00] The Bible speaks of it as a necessary part of God's plan. The ascension is an uplifting experience in so many ways. It stands on equal footing with the crucifixion and resurrection in the earliest declarations of the gospel.

Not only was the ascension of Jesus Christ necessary but the disciples even refer to it as primary proof of Jesus' identity as the Messiah.

Rather than trying to explain away his absence they declared it with bold enthusiasm. The ascension is the triumphal act that completes Jesus' work and his mission.

It puts the final stroke on both the royal and priestly ministries of the Messiah in which David's heir ascends to reign and the great high priest completes the presentation of the atoning sacrifice.

As the Nicene Creed of 4th century declaration of the core beliefs of our faith so powerfully states on the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the father he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end amen to us um let's just save a full time to an time to even it in time tra him to a duty to to truly in to amp a