

"Ascension Day" Acts 1:1–11

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- [0 : 0 0] So why don't we pray as we enter into reflecting on what God would say to us today through his holy word. Thank you, Lord, that you gather us here by your word and spirit.
- Thank you that you are king overall. Thank you that we have a great high priest who's gone before us. We ask you as a royal priesthood to make us more and more attentive to your word.
- More and more diligent in serving. More and more hopeful about your coming. And this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Now if someone were to ask you, what would you say is the central truth of Christianity?
- What might you say? Would it be that in Jesus God became incarnate? Is it that Jesus died on the cross to save us?
- Is it that he rose again? Or is it maybe that he's coming again? Growing up in Mexico, I remember how much that last truth tended to dominate the sermons at one particular time.
- [1 : 2 0] In my growing up years there, it seemed to be that we were always hearing a sermon on the second coming. Well, sometimes we do put one of these events at the center of our theological map, if you like.
- Such that it becomes a kind of lens through which we think about everything else that we believe. And that can be helpful at times. I'm thinking of C.S. Lewis in his book *Miracles*.
- Which I read some time ago. But I'm recalling that he referred to the incarnation as the central event in the history of planet Earth.
- He was trying to explain, I think, how the fact of God becoming man was the grand miracle. Have you read that one? That essay? The grand miracle. The one central miracle that makes all other miracles make sense.
- But if we shift the focus so that we can translate that grand miracle, because we can leave that in the abstract as something out there.
- [2 : 2 7] If we can shift the focus so that, what does it mean in terms of the salvation that we have in and through Jesus? I think the creed that we just recited invites us to hold all the events together as part of one grand event, if you like.
- But there's the thing. Between the, he was incarnate by the Holy Spirit, and the, he shall come again with glory. There's one moment in particular that tends to get overlooked somewhat.
- And that's what we want to think about and reflect on, guided by Scripture this morning. I'm guessing you know which moment, because we've had colleagues about it. Yes, Jesus' ascension was an event in his earthly life.
- Forty days after he rose from the dead, whose place in the plan of salvation, well, we're just not always that clear about. There are some reasons for that, but I won't go into those right now.
- Let's just take it that we tend to let the ascension kind of take a quiet seat somewhere else. And we don't come to it very often.

[3 : 41] So I want us to think about what the ascension means for us and for our salvation. For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven and continuing on.

All of this is for us and for our salvation. In this case, I'm not going to walk through the passage that we heard in Acts, because my aim is to get at the meaning of the event in the light of Scripture as a whole.

But do have that passage open, because I will be referring to it. Now, in modern times, many people, even some professing Christians, have doubted that Jesus' ascension was a public historic event.

They'll continue to recite the Creed as a kind of way to acknowledge what we used to believe, maybe. But when it comes to explaining the meaning of the ascension, they'll take us back to the resurrection first and say that it was really at heart, well, an experience in the lives and hearts of the disciples.

And so there was no tomb that was emptied one morning, they say. Rather, Jesus somehow rose in their hearts, you've probably heard this on Easter morning, so that they really, truly felt him to be alive.

[5 : 05] And so 40 days later, so this view goes, it's not my view, I'm just saying someone's view, they felt that he had, if you like, relocated to heaven.

So a well-known Anglican bishop, I'm not going to name, some years ago said, if Jesus' ascension was a literal event in history, it is beyond the capacity of our 21st century minds to accept it or to believe it.

Now, maybe just two thoughts on that. I think we need to be more interested in how the Bible reads 21st century minds than with how 21st century minds read the Bible.

I think that should be clear from where we stand as a church, Church of the Messiah and the wider fellowship of our wider Anglican communion.

In any case, 21st century minds aren't a single thing, as if our collective wisdom were some sort of reliable guide. And second, we need to consider what happens to other basic Christian beliefs once we suppose that it doesn't really matter, in the end, whether the resurrection and the ascension actually happened in history.

[6 : 25] If Jesus' resurrection and ascension were events that happened in the hearts and minds of the early disciples, then just maybe, maybe, well, we can think about the other events that way.

It makes sense. So whether we're talking about the incarnation or the cross or the second coming, we're talking mainly about ideas, we're talking about feelings, intuitions, that have no historical grounding.

And if that's the case, then where are we left? Well, we're left in our sins. We're left without a mediator between God and man. We're left without hope of salvation.

So what sort of event was the ascension? And what does it tell us about Jesus' work of salvation? Well, as we consider together what the Bible teaches, my hope and prayer is that we'll grasp something of the majesty of this event, something of the wonder, that we'll be encouraged in our faith and that we'll be more confident as we tell others the good news that has been entrusted to us.

So to the event itself, what sort of moment are we talking about? Well, if you're taking notes, I would start with point one. It was one of a kind, not like any other event in history, just like Jesus' resurrection was one of a kind.

[7 : 52] Lazarus and others that Jesus raised from the dead were, in Spanish, we use the same word, resucitado, but in English, we distinguish resuscitated from resurrected.

Lazarus was resuscitated. He would die again. But Jesus was raised bodily, never to die again. And so too with the ascension. Now some religious groups speak of ascended masters like Confucius or Buddha or the Buddha, but there was no claim, there's no claim there to any kind of bodily resurrection there.

Well, what about Enoch and Elijah? Well, whatever their taking up into heaven was, it didn't involve coming from heaven in the first place. And that's why Jesus says in John 3, 13, no one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the son of man.

You see, descent, ascent, one of a kind. Two, the ascension is an event that is logically paired or twinned with the incarnation. Think of the incarnation and the ascension as, if you like, the bookends of Jesus's earthly ministry.

The word sent by the Father became flesh and dwelt among us, John 1, and now having completed what the Father sent him to do, the word incarnate returns to the Father.

[9 : 20] But, and this is the really important but, without disincarnating, without undoing the incarnation, you'd be surprised.

I've read the occasional book in theology, and there's a pretty sharp theologian, I won't name, but I came across a line in one of his books that said, once the incarnate life of Jesus was over.

And then I wrote in the margin, when was that? When did that happen? And maybe he didn't mean to put it quite like that. Maybe he meant something else by that. But, at any rate, that phrase could be highly misleading.

The incarnate life of Jesus never ended. It didn't sort of just stop. The ascended Lord remains Jesus of Nazareth. He rose, and he ascended bodily, and we can affirm that from Scripture.

We know this because in Luke 24, 39, after his resurrection, Jesus shows his disciples that he's human. He says, touch me and see, he says.

[10 : 30] Then he eats a piece of what? A broiled fish. And so when he's taken to heaven, he's not some sort of ghost, as we might imagine in popular ideas.

Point three. While unique, the ascension was similar in kind to other manifestations of God's glory. That's to say, it was the sort of event that moved those who witnessed it to want to worship.

Recall the transfiguration. Remember that moment when God revealed this spectacular display of God, of Jesus' glory, with Elijah and Moses there appearing beside him.

And in these moments, God does wondrous and amazing things, things that are hard to understand in the moment, but whose meaning God himself will reveal in his time.

For the ascension is an event in which Jesus truly departs. This is something that we easily forget, mainly because we want to hold on to the promise of Jesus himself that he will be with us as we go.

[11 : 45] But I think we still have to get things in the right order. When the clouds surrounded him and he was carried up or away from us, he truly did depart. Of course, we shouldn't think that by heaven we mean some far-off galaxy, because in God's plan, heaven will take up creation itself, into itself.

But the point is this. Jesus is removed physically into a dimension we can't yet perceive or inhabit.

Our eyes aren't ready for it, for its glory. But we can be sure that it's there. And more there than we can even imagine.

More real. Finally, the ascension is an event in history. Just as Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, well, nearly six weeks later, he walked out to Bethany, maybe two kilometers, I think, with his disciples, and there he was taken up into heaven.

And just as with the emptying of the tomb on Easter morning, someone with a video camera, theoretically, could have filmed the ascension. So let me sum things up.

[13 : 04] Jesus' ascension is like other divine manifestations, but it's unique. And his ascension is physical in history, and he truly leaves space-time as we know it.

So that's the event itself. I'm sure I haven't exhausted everything that we can say about the moment, but I think those are some of the key points I would want to draw out. What does it mean for Jesus' work of salvation?

And this is part two. Well, first, it teaches us that his work was one of obedience to the Father. In a sense, it was necessary in this sense.

Why did Jesus have to ascend? Have you wondered about that? Why couldn't he just stay and start ruling right then and there?

Well, evidently, that's what the disciples had in mind. Don't take it from me. They said, Lord, in Acts 1-6, we read, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?

[14 : 09] They were thinking, look, Jesus is risen. And this has to be the most wonderful thing we could ever think of. His death didn't destroy our hopes after all, so now surely he is going to start his earthly reign.

But it wasn't to be that in God's timing. for now, Jesus had finished the task he was sent to accomplish and it was time to return to the Father.

We could wish that he had acted according to our best sense of timing, but he tells us, as we heard in verse 7, it's not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.

We know that his work on the cross for our redemption is now complete. The victory has been won. Paul tells us that for his obedience to death on the cross, and you've been studying about this, God highly exalted him.

In other words, God restored to him the glory and majesty that he had willingly set aside to come and be among us as a servant.

[15 : 22] Second point, the ascension teaches us that Jesus' work continues. That is, the ascension did not mark Jesus' retirement from ministry as we might have supposed.

In the early days of the pandemic, can you remember those early days even now? I remember how a preacher somewhere said that the day Jesus ascended was the day he started working from home.

Well, that's very true. It's a very insightful thing to say. Because the eternal home that he's preparing for you and me, if we have trusted in him, even now is right there where he is with the Father.

He's preparing a home. I don't think we have to imagine that he's got suburbs growing out and out and further out, right?

There's another little Lewis idea. But he's preparing a home, a dwelling place. This is our longing if we read the Psalms and we know that we were made to be at home with the Father in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and with Jesus as our brother.

[16 : 45] Father. So, well, what else is he doing from home? Got any ideas? Well, Romans 8.34 tells us that he's interceding for us before the Father.

I opened from Hebrews with that. This is a very great comfort to us if we have put our trust in him because if we continue with Paul there in that glorious Romans 8 passage, we learn that Jesus' pleading on our behalf means, if you follow reading there in Romans 8, nothing can now separate us from the Father's love.

That's what his interceding is aimed at, at giving us the comfort and the assurance that nothing can separate us from the Father's love.

And along with representing us before the Father this way, the Gospel readings over the last Sundays if you've noticed have been reminding us of something else that Jesus is doing presently while he's speaking.

So his ministry there is not only a priestly one if you like as he faces the Father right on our behalf pleading for us.

[18 : 04] It includes a prophetic one in the sense of continuing his teaching ministry with his face turned towards us. His people declaring to us the Father's will for us.

And that's why we can say that he not only was the way, the truth, and the life but that he is forever the way, the truth, and the life. And that the way to abide in him back in Galilee in the first century or today in the 21st century here in Kanata.

The way to abide in him is what? Is to have his words abide in us. John 15, 7. Well, how is that supposed to happen? How are his words supposed to abide in us? Well, the answer is simple and it reveals that marvelous unity of purpose between the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus says in John 16, 14, the Holy Spirit will take what is mine and he'll declare it to you.

What a marvelous picture of the unity and purpose of the Holy Spirit and the eternal Son of God. Sure enough, moved by the Holy Spirit, the early disciples would find themselves remembering what Jesus had taught them as well as grasping what they were not yet able to understand while he was with them so that they could put it all down in writing.

[19 : 35] And so it is that we 21st century disciples hear God's voice, hear Jesus' voice today as the same Holy Spirit impresses the truths of Scripture on our hearts, giving us hope and purpose and understanding as we do that.

A third truth that the ascension teaches us is that Jesus will come again. When Jesus promised in John 14 3 to prepare a place for his disciples, he promised his return.

I will come again, he said, and I will take you to myself, that where I am you may also be. Now as I pointed out earlier, if we imagine that Jesus, that Jesus' ascension was just an experience in the hearts or minds of the disciples, then we're going to think of his return as something in the same category, something that we bring about through our noble efforts.

Or if we think that in his ascension, as some others have imagined, that Jesus' body just sort of merges with creation or collapses into it, then again, his return will mean what?

Well, it will just mean some kind of intensifying of that. There will be nothing of the coming in the clouds with great power and glory and every eye seeing him.

[21 : 04] But what we can be certain of following Holy Scripture is that his return will be cataclysmic, it will be an event at the end of history but still within it, that will usher in the final judgment as well as inaugurate the new heavens and the new earth.

that's a big topic but let me just emphasize at least that. And the Jesus who returns, by the way, is not some other Jesus or some other principle.

But that's why Acts 1.11 says this same Jesus that you've seen ascend. Isn't that a marvelous thought that this same Jesus that the disciples saw taken from them, removed from their sight, will be the Jesus who returns and not someone else?

Well, we've seen something of what the ascension means in itself and what it means for Jesus' saving work, so let me just suggest how it might shape our response this morning.

I offer three thoughts. You always have to have three, right, at least. And each of these comes with a challenge for us today. And what holds these three thoughts together is the pattern of the disciples' experience right from the resurrection to Pentecost.

[22 : 34] There's like three stages, and so that helps me organize these three remarks. First, the ascension moves us to joyful worship.

While still with his disciples, but after his resurrection, Jesus fills them with a sense of great anticipation. And how does he do that? Well, in Luke 24, written by the same man who wrote Acts 1, right, we know, he prepares them for what's ahead.

He does this by opening their minds to the meaning of scriptures as it relates to the events that have been unfolding. healing. He reminds them that they've been privileged to witness these events.

And he says that this message is going to go out to the nations, and he promises to send the Holy Spirit. Now, we know that the Father sends the Spirit, the Son also promises to send the Spirit, and we have this unity and purpose of sending the Spirit.

Spirit. And that's what authentic, sorry, let me back up, when he ascends, they worship him spontaneously.

[23 : 50] Maybe they raised their hands, maybe they shouted words of praise, whatever it was, it was enthusiastic. And that's what authentic worship is, no matter whether we belong to a culture that encourages quiet restraint in the presence of the things of God, or to a more festive one that calls for shouts and dancing.

I felt this really sharply when I went with a group from London to Peru, and we had a Russian lady on our team, and she said, Steve, you're like two people.

In England, you're like this. And over here in Peru, well, you're just like this. And I said, thank you for that rebuke. I'll try to be more consistent. But at any rate, you can feel the difference in cultural expressions of the faith, and what counts as enthusiasm.

But in either case, I would argue, there's a response of gratitude and joy that's bound to be marked in one way or another. Well, let's remember, though, that at this stage, the disciples, even here, think they're supposed to be clinging to the moment.

That's why when the men dressed in white say to them, hey, why are you gazing up into heaven like this? It's because they were doing what comes most naturally. We want to remain there in that moment.

[25 : 14] We want to, even as they witnessed, the disciples that witnessed the transfiguration, but they were going to have to learn that there was something else they needed to pay attention to.

And that brings us to the second moment and second thought. The ascension of Jesus inspires joyful waiting. So there's joyful worship, but there's also joyful waiting.

The disciples were told to do what? Not to stand there gazing, but to go and wait for the promised Holy Spirit. And they obey. They say, all right, that's what we're going to do. With joy, we're told, they went where?

To the temple. And there they were to be found praising God. Same spirit that rested on Simeon as he eagerly awaited Israel's consolation was soon to come upon them all.

And there was an eager anticipation of that based on a trustworthy promise given. And our call for you and me this morning and our privilege is to wait eagerly for Jesus to come again.

[26 : 24] Do you want a good picture of godly waiting? Consider Isaiah 40, 31, which I can never read anymore since Chariots of Fire without thinking of Ian Charlson's wonderful way of reading, which I think gives us, I don't know if Ian Charlson was a believer, but boy, oh boy, the way he read that passage, it was just such a good example for scripture reading in the presence of the congregation.

Maybe you know which moment I'm talking about, but he's in the church there on the Sunday morning that he might have been running, and he's reading from Isaiah. Like the eagle that waits for and depends on the wind, so those that wait upon the Lord renew their strength.

They run the race and walk the way of Jesus in his strength and not their own. So by the Holy Spirit's prompting, we come to experience joyful worship and expectant waiting.

But if we wait eagerly, we also wait actively, and this, according to Jesus' promise, and this takes us to the third moment and to my final thought and challenge.

I think the ascension of Jesus motivates a witness that's bold and powerful. The experience of the disciples was that they first knew joyful worship, from there they were led to wait eagerly, and then when the promised Holy Spirit came, they moved out into active and bold witness.

[28 : 01] Recall with me how it happened. We're still in Luke 24, backing up to the background to the passage you read. Before his ascension, Jesus told his disciples that they were to be his witnesses, but that before their message could go to the nations, they needed to be clothed with power from on high, verse 49 of Luke 24.

And that power was, of course, a personal one, because it was the power and is the power that belongs to the person of the Holy Spirit.

And this power fell upon the disciples at Pentecost, equipping them for courageous witness, launching a movement that would go to the ends of the earth.

It was already in the early DNA, wasn't it, with Pentecost and going to the nations. And there's the challenge for you and for me today, since it's the same Holy Spirit who's working today, guiding God's people in mission until the day Jesus comes back.

Now, if we've come to know the risen and ascended Jesus as Savior and as Master, will know the joy that comes in that relationship itself.

[29 : 21] And we'll grow in it as we let Jesus' words abide, do their work in us. It will be an abiding joy, even in the midst of sadness, of hardship, of rejection by the world.

But if we've known that joy, we'll also have a longing in our hearts for Jesus' kingdom to come. It's a longing that we know no earthly arrangement or institution can satisfy, even if we behave otherwise, coming to put our trust in princes at times.

But it will be those very failures themselves that God will use to bring us back to our first love. finally, if we felt in our hearts that longing for Jesus' return and for the new creation that Paul presents to us there in Romans, then our desire will be to see people from all people groups come to know him for who he is.

Our godly waiting will serve as a witness, to be sure. People will see the hope. They will get a glimpse of the hope that we have, but so too will our testimony be necessary.

And the idea of bearing verbal witness to others shouldn't scare us once we understand what it is. It's not about eloquence. It's not about fine words.

[30 : 50] It's not about graduate degrees in theology and philosophy. It's not about having your theology all nice and tidy. Once God's love in Christ has taken hold of us, our verbal witness is as simple as the words of that woman Jesus met at the well.

Come and see a man who told me everything about myself. Or it's as simple as declaring with Peter that the words of eternal life are in Jesus.

So may we grow in boldness to share that word with others, trusting that it will be the Holy Spirit who works in people's hearts. And as we do that, may we not think of ourselves just as scattered, lonely Christians out there.

Solitary Christians, but as real ambassadors for the household of God. And of the congregation that bears the name Messiah, who is our one hope in this life and the world to come.

Amen.