

The Ascension Of Jesus - 9th May 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Hey up everyone, welcome to another Sunday session from St John's Community Church here on YouTube.

Super duper to be back in your presence once again. Don't know if you've been sheltering from the April showers in May that we've been experiencing. So come on sunshine, let's be having you. We're on the cusp of brighter times in all sorts of ways, but the mixed weather is perhaps a realistic reflection of where we're currently at. Sunshine and showers, a right mixed bag of emotions and expectations.

Well, whatever the weather, the hope is that this next half hour or so will bring at least respite, maybe some refreshment to us as we check in with God in the virtual company of each other. Lottie's got another Sunday Stars session on offer today, looking at the story of Jesus with Mary and Martha. And she's featuring one of my all-time favourite episodes of Peppa Pig as Mummy Pig battles a sexist reception at the fairground.

[1 : 10] So do dip your trotters into that one if you've got younger ones with you today. For us here though, let's offer ourselves afresh into the cosmic care of the God who thinks the world of us.

And so thank you God for your faithful fascination with us. The fact you care so compassionately for our lives that you came to be one of us in Jesus.

And then stay with us through the presence of your Holy Spirit. We want to say thank you for this life because it's good to be alive.

Yes, we can easily get bogged down and blinkered and Blumenek is tough at times. But when we take a step back and reflect on how amazing it is to be alive, to be blessed by you with independence, individuality, interdependence with one another.

Well, it is a gift, this life. So help us to treat it as such, both for our own sake and for the well-being of others. Indeed, help us to hear from you now so that we might be aligned, realigned even, with you and your ways.

[2 : 26] Following your guidance, emulating your generosity, living in ways which are decent, kind and caring. Thank you God.

Amen. Amen. Amen. All right, let's wind down the windows, pump up the stereo, release the handbrake and steer our way through what's in store.

Because it would be good today to spend some time thinking about the ascension of Jesus. As we've been looking at in these weeks after Easter, Jesus had various encounters with his disciples, whether in Jerusalem or up on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, opening their eyes to the truth of his resurrection, repairing relationships where needed, and commissioning them for the journey ahead. And yet for reasons which we'll try and unpack as we go, the time soon comes for Jesus to leave his disciples and return to heaven, an event known as the ascension of Jesus.

Now, most of our information in the Bible about this elevating event comes from the writings of Luke. Indeed, he rounds off his gospel with these verses.

[3 : 43] Here's a clip. When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them.

While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. And so, what are we told?

Well, not a lot, really. Just three or four verses for one of the most significant but surreal events in the Bible. And yet, just in case we think that the writer, Luke, is underplaying things with his brevity, the good news is that he expands on this ascension story in the book he writes as the sequel to his gospel.

The book in the Bible we know as the Acts of the Apostles. In fact, here's how Luke recalls the same ascension event in the early verses of this book of Acts.

[5 : 14] He writes this. In my former book, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

Apostles being another word for disciples, only apostles has an additional meaning of being sent by Jesus to do a task. The passage carries on.

After his suffering, Jesus presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command. Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my father promised, which you have heard me speak about.

For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Then they gathered round him and asked him, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

[6 : 22] 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 in 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? 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.

Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a half a mile walk from the city. So Luke fleshes out the story with a few more details, details which give us insight into what the ascension of Jesus is all about.

For a start, Luke tells us it had been 40 days in total since Jesus' resurrection, a number which crops up every now and again in the Bible as a way of illustrating something which has reached an end point.

[7 : 43] 40 is a kind of complete number. You know, I think the top 40 on top of the pops and all that. But 40 is also associated with a time of testing.

So in the Bible you get the 40 days and nights of rain which brought the floods, which floated Noah's boat. You get the 40 years of wilderness wanderings of the ancient Israelites.

And you get the 40 days where Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. All times of testing in one way or another, but also times which reached their completion.

And so we can see Jesus' time on earth following his resurrection as being something similar. Testing and refining his disciples so that they were ready for the next stage.

But also that after 40 days of doing this, Jesus knew his time on earth was up as he'd done what he came to do. What else?

[8 : 42] Well, we're told Jesus was taken up. Taken up into heaven, as Luke puts it in his gospel. And although we obviously know from space travel that heaven is not literally above the clouds, as ancient folks tended to believe, this taking up reflects the idea that Jesus has now gone to a higher place, above and beyond our experience and understanding.

Yeah, I fully appreciate this idea of an almost kind of hovering Jesus is a pretty weird scenario to get our heads round. And the heavenly whereabouts of the physical Jesus now is nothing short of a mystery.

But I guess if Jesus is going to depart this world, he's got to leave in one direction and up is certainly the most meaningfully symbolic in terms of what could be called a heavenly destination.

Interestingly, Luke also says that as Jesus was taken up, a cloud hid him from their sight. And again, there's symbolism here too, as it recalls the way in which God's holy presence is often described in the Old Testament, such as the cloud which accompanied the Israelites as God led them through the wilderness, or the cloud of God's glory which was said to have filled the temple.

You know, there's a lot going on here. But I just want to dwell on one other detail which is significant because we're told that Jesus ascends from a place called the Mount of Olives. Now, the Mount of Olives is really a hillside on the other side of a valley called the Kidron Valley, which separates it

from the city of Jerusalem.

[10:24] You can see all this today. It's the hillside from where you get the classic tourist view of the city with the golden dome of the rock now located in the exact same spot as the temple would have stood in Jesus' day.

In fact, let's turn that view around 180 degrees. So, here's the view looking out towards the Mount of Olives from the Dome of the Rock over the Kidron Valley.

You've got the Garden of Gethsemane down near the bottom on the left and then above that, above this golden domed Russian-looking church. Somewhere on this Mount of Olives hillside was where we're told Jesus ascended into heaven.

In fact, it's probably somewhere around here with a cracking view looking back to the city of Jerusalem. Why is this location significant?

Well, the disciples would have been aware, I think, of some Old Testament prophecies which predicted that the Mount of Olives was going to be the location from where the Messiah, God's anointed leader, was supposed to enter Jerusalem and restore the nation of Israel to a position of power.

[11:39] So, for example, you've got this passage from the prophet Zechariah who says this. Now, it's this kind of prophecy which helps to explain Now, it's this kind of prophecy which helps to explain why the crowds were so fired up on Palm Sunday, for example, because we know Jesus entered Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives.

And yet, as his donkey mode of transport indicated, although Jesus was indeed the Messiah, he'd come not as a war-waging warrior, but as a humble man of the people.

Well, then, just a few days after Palm Sunday, it's also the kind of prophecy which helps explain why Peter drew his sword and cut off the high priest's servant's ear on the night Jesus was arrested on the Mount of Olives.

So, you can imagine Peter, with his sword in his hand, would have thought, right, this is the time, this is the place for the Messiah to take on the Roman and religious authorities by force.

But again, Jesus says, Now, put your sword away, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. And yet, despite these clear signals from Jesus that his way, his kingdom, was to be an altogether different way of life, a way of peace, of love, of generosity, and so on, still, the disciples seem to think that the resurrected Jesus is finally about to launch a plan of attack, because as they stand huddled around him on the Mount of Olives, they ask Jesus, Lord, that you are this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel.

[13:39] In other words, surely this is the time for the risen Jesus to declare a revolution. You know, I sort of imagine the disciples were expecting this Mount of Olives scene to be like that sequence in Rocky II, where he's climbing the steps in Philadelphia, you know, the people's champion, ready to take on the world with his young disciples, all surrounding him, willing him on to defeat his opponents.

You know, they want a revolution from Jesus. Now, does Jesus start a revolution? Well, yes and no.

He is going to fly now, but not as the disciples were expecting. You will receive power, he says, but power not based in force, but in love.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And with that, he was taken up before their very eyes. Jesus disappears, the last time his disciples would see him this side of heaven.

[14:54] I mean, I don't know how you'd feel if you were one of the disciples at this point. Would you be gutted? Would you be overwhelmed? Would you be amazed? Would you be happy? I mean, as people, we love a good ending.

Don't mention a line of duty, I promise you, fella, but is this ending of Jesus' time on earth a good one for the disciples? Well, according to Luke, yes it was, because he says that after Jesus left, then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

They worshipped Jesus in his physical absence, a lesson for us, no doubt, but they were filled with great joy. And Luke fleshes it out a bit more in Acts by revealing a couple of angels then appeared to the disciples, saying, Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?

In other words, you know, Chip Chop looked lively, didn't you hear him? You're going to get God's Holy Spirit and there's work to do in spreading the good news. Go on then, get going.

It's like Jesus has said, Yes, I am indeed resurrected, and the city of Jerusalem and beyond need to know this good news. But my time here is done.

[16:14] Instead, it's going to be you, my disciples, who will witness to this truth. You will share this good news with people. And if that feels daunting, don't worry, because I'll give you my power, my spirit, to enable you to do that sharing in all sorts of ways.

In a sense, if Jesus does indeed want to commission his disciples to do his work, to witness and preach and teach and heal for him, he needs to go.

You see, if Jesus had stuck around in person in the first century, he could only have been in one place at any one time, and his ability to spread the good news of his resurrection would have been severely limited.

Instead, by ascending to heaven, Jesus has another, better plan. The plan to enable his disciples, to enable us, through the Holy Spirit, to ensure that his good news is shared and lived out far and wide.

Whatever happens to the disciples, wherever they go, wherever we go, the ascended Jesus is able to promise us that through his spirit, surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.

[17:41] Now, the brilliance of this plan of Jesus to go so that his spirit would come means that his presence is both ongoing and everywhere with disciples and with us now.

You know, the spirit, which we'll look at in more detail in a couple of weeks at Pentecost. And yet, whilst all that Pentecost stuff is to come, there's a detail to the ascension of Jesus which gives us an insight into just how amazing this presence of the spirit of Jesus with us now is.

Indeed, although we say Jesus ascended, probably because in some way he went up, I think more accurately we might describe Jesus' departure here as being exalted.

It's an old-fashioned word, maybe, but it's one which means that Jesus was taking his rightful place in heaven. And I say that because there's a passage in the book of Daniel which Luke seems to be alluding to in the way he describes things here.

Passage in which Daniel describes his vision of what the heavenly presence of God looks like. He says this, In my vision I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.

[19:05] He approached the Ancient of Days, classic way of describing God, and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power.

All nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

It's quite the vision. Daniel gives us a glimpse of what Luke means when he tells us that Jesus was taken up to heaven. It's not that he's simply gone somewhere to hang about and put his feet up.

No, he's not been furloughed, if you like. Rather, it's that Jesus has now taken his place in the heavenly realm as the one with all authority, glory, and power.

It's an awesome picture of the reality of who Jesus really is. He's not any less human than he's always been, but now we see him in all his divine glory too.

[20:09] Similarly, Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, describes the ascended Jesus as being far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named.

What's more, he says, God has placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything. Jesus has ultimate authority.

Jesus is over everything. All things means all things. over COVID, over Boris, over the economy, over all powers and political systems, over all countries, all communities, all churches, all households, over all work, all rest, all play.

Nothing is out of his reach or beyond his power. And that means that when we invite Jesus through his spirit into our lives, we're plugging into the one who is over all things.

the only one who has the power, the authority, the ability to help us, to heal us, to enable us, to witness to the difference God has made in our lives and share out his love and joy and peace with those around us.

[21:23] You know, the spirit of God is not simply some feel-good, positive thinking mindfulness. No, as good as that may be, the spirit is so much more.

The spirit is the very essence, the cosmic power, the literal glory of God who lives in and through us. Do you see?

Yes, Jesus came to be one of us. He knows what everyday life is about, lived our life, died our death and because he rose again we can know him as our friend. But beyond that, bigger than that, by ascending to heaven and sending his spirit in his place, all of our lives are now being shaped and equipped by this same Jesus who is not just our friend but is the one who has taken his rightful place as the king of the universe.

The writer Tim Keller puts it like this, the ascension is not the absence of Christ, it's the increased and heightened presence of Christ.

That means as witnesses to that truth, our job is not to stand there looking at the sky but to be grounded here on earth in seeking first the kingdom of God, in helping to build life in ways which put Jesus at the centre.

[22 : 54] And so for us as individuals that means living with integrity where our character and conduct is defined not simply by what we show in public but by who we are behind closed doors.

That means for us in our homes we live in ways which welcome the stranger, support our neighbours, give our money away rather than simply feathering our own nest.

that means as a church we help to build and model a community way of life which is one of inclusion not exclusion one of honesty not hypocrisy.

That means as a nation and who we elect to govern us we're called to live in ways which ask not what might be in it for us but rather how we might be of benefit and be a blessing to other nations to be a force for good in the world through the way we care for the environment combat economic inequality invest in healthcare support social development champion justice model generosity and so on.

You know the task Jesus gives us to be his witnesses is that we're to share the good news of his love. It's not enough to simply know what we're against rather there needs to be a positive inspiring vision offered as well and I'd say as God's people it's more important to be known by what we're for than what we're against.

[24 : 24] The fruit of the spirit the result of God being at work in our lives will see the increase of love joy peace patience kindness goodness faithfulness gentleness and self-control they're the markers for what makes our message our witness good news they're the standards by which we're to conceive create and cultivate our common life together that's the way of the kingdom that's the way of the spirit that's the life which Jesus unleashed through his ascension and by the promise of his spirit yes we've got some working out to do in terms of what this good news might look like as we begin to gather together again once more but just as the disciples return to Jerusalem with great joy my hope my prayer my expectation is that a renewal of joy might characterise our community as we worship God witness to his love and work for the good of each other and so may the risen ascended spirit sending

Jesus bless us so that we might be a blessing both this week and beyond indeed with worship in mind here's a track which the St. John's Band have put together for us this week which is spot on for all that we've been looking at today it's the song Jesus at the Centre of it all Jesus at the centre of it all Jesus at the centre of it all.

From beginning to the end, it'll always be, it's always been you, Jesus. Jesus, nothing else matters. Nothing in this world will do. Jesus, you're the center.

Everything revolves around you, Jesus, you're the center of it all.

[27 : 20] The center of it all. Jesus, be the center of my life.

Jesus, be the center of my life. From beginning to the end, it'll always be, it's always been you, Jesus.

Jesus, be the center of my life. Jesus, be the center of my life.

Everything in this world will do. Jesus, you're the center.

Everything revolves around you, Jesus, you. Jesus, you. From my heart to the heavens, Jesus, be the center.

[28 : 37] Jesus, be the center of my life. It's all about you. Yes, it's all about you. From my heart to the heavens, Jesus, be the center.

It's all about you. Yes, it's all about you. From my heart to the heavens, Jesus, be the center.

Jesus, be the center. It's all about you. Yes, it's all about you. From my heart to the heavens, Jesus, be the center.

It's all about you. Yes, it's all about you. Jesus, be the center of your church.

Jesus, be the center of your church. And every knee will bow.

[29 : 50] And every tongue shall confess you, Jesus. Jesus, nothing else matters.

Nothing in this world will do. Jesus, you're the center.

Everything revolves around you. Jesus, you. You're the center of it all.

The center of it all. You're the center of it all.

The center of it all. The center of it all.

[31 : 03] Beautiful. And huge thanks to Mark there for that song this week. Jesus at the center of it all.

All right, let's call last orders there for today. Thanks very much for being part of this. And if you'd like to consider some questions and further thoughts in light of what we've been looking at, do check out our little extra time video, which accompanies this session.

And as always, if you found this session helpful, do feel free to share it on social media with friends.

And if you haven't done so already, do hit subscribe on YouTube, and that'll keep you up to speed with new videos on here over the coming weeks and months.

We'll be back next week. But before then, let's go with God's blessing over us. And so, may the blessing of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be with you and be with me.

And may that blessing go with us. So that we can witness to the good news, to the love of God, seen in Jesus and lived out through the Spirit, both now and always.

[32 : 21] Amen. That's amazing.

I realized that God is less old and blind but are través of love of God. Because of God from heaven in all of us. Like His music to do belong. To The Father that esch a Phyta topip, the throne of the Father, Him for God long in all the cries of God. The Father seems to be accomplished proud and left unhapposed, even when the ■ dois, And the Lord thinks about the gospel of God in all the Stress ourselves.

And the Lord appreciates the Holy Spirit hiding place with his followers and all those gifts. I wish thisancia Be patient today. I can't wait to learn the lesson until tomorrow. That's interesting. I don't believe the fear, we peshost on this plan.

You're going to enter pronto to help me know what I spell out for you. Thank you.