

New Presence

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] And pray as we stand. Oh God our Father, we pray now that as we look at these words in the Bible, you would open our eyes to see you, that you would open our hearts to love you, for the glory of your great name. Amen.

Well, you'll find it helpful if you open up your Bibles to Acts chapter 1, the passage we just had read, page 112 near the back.

And while you're doing that, I want to let you know that Bron and I tried the new Canada line yesterday out to the airport, and it is mighty good fun, I have to tell you.

It's like a roller coaster for grown-ups. And all the adults in the carriage were behaving themselves, but at the front of the carriage there was a family with three children, and every new thing that happened, the kids would go, ooh, and ah.

We, of course, were being very mature, but we went down Canby, under the ground, and then you come up high, and you stop at a station, you're about to go over the bridge over to Richmond, and as we were pulling out of the station, one of the little boys turned to his dad and said, Daddy, are we going to have to make a jump now?

[1 : 22] And all the adults suddenly said, oh dear, I don't know if I paid for this. Well now, the reason I say that is because today we come to the big jump.

This is the day when Jesus ascends from earth to heaven. Last week we looked at the first couple of verses in Acts, and they're completely dominated by the resurrection of Jesus.

And in a way, the whole of the book of Acts is just working out the implications of the resurrection of Jesus, which is what the Christian life is all about as well.

But by itself, the resurrection is insufficient. In fact, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are incomplete without the ascension.

You know, we celebrate Easter, we give it a whole weekend, but I think sometimes the ascension just drops off and gets forgotten about.

[2 : 23] Each year in Vancouver here, we host the firework competition, the celebration of light. And at the Shorts House, we can see the top half, well, the top quarter, maybe the top tenth of the fireworks from a three-inch slit in the bathroom upstairs.

And what you see is this. You see the rocket. You can just make it out as it rises in the sky, and then when it gets to the pinnacle, it explodes, and you can see all the fireworks and the pyrotechnics flow out, and we've spent many happy hours up there in the bathroom.

Now, the reason I say that is because if the resurrection is like the rocket rising, the ascension is the explosion, where all the goodness and blessing and greatness and grace of Jesus becomes available for us, it's the ascension that's key.

And I just want to point out three things the ascension means, and then we'll try and cover off the second half of the chapter fairly quickly. The ascension of Jesus means three things.

The first is that Jesus is accessible to all of us, everywhere. For 40 days, Jesus has been appearing.

[3 : 54] He's just risen from the dead. He's appearing to people, and we know that he appeared to 500 at one time. The problem is this. In verse 8, he said, you're going to go out and be witnesses to the end of the earth.

But how can Jesus support the mission if he can only appear to one person or a couple of people at a time, and his presence is located? How can he be with them to the ends of the earth?

And the answer is, he first has to ascend into heaven. Verse 9, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven, first reference, as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes and said, men of Galilee, why

you stand looking into heaven, second reference, this Jesus who has taken from you into heaven, third reference, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

Four times. I can't remember anywhere else where Luke beats the drum four times on something. Heaven, heaven, heaven, heaven. And we have got to get rid of the silly, spatial idea of heaven. As though heaven is a sort of a place a couple of thousand meters in the air above the surface of the earth. You know, from the very first verse of the Bible, the Bible takes a very sophisticated view of heaven.

[5 : 15] Heaven is something that God has created as the place for himself to dwell and heaven and earth interlock and intersect. When sin comes into the world, the two are not so obviously connected.

There's a difference in the relationship with them and there's a separation. But here's the thing, heaven is not just up there as though if I could just get the right jet propulsion, I could make it to where God is or if I just, I could get on the spiritual elevator and push H, I'd meet God.

There's still a parallel and interlockingness about heaven and earth in our world now. It's not a two-decker universe. But although they're separated, heaven still permeates and pervades earth a little like light through a Venetian blind.

And at the end of the Bible we are told that when Christ comes again, heaven will come down and heaven and earth will become one. It's not a physical place.

Going to heaven doesn't make Jesus a spiritual space traveller zooming to another situation. It is the presence and dwelling of God. And here is the point. On the day Jesus ascended into God's presence, the relationship between heaven and earth changed.

[6 : 37] He's the first human being to be raised from the dead. He goes to the place of God so that all the glory and all the forgiveness and all the goodness of Jesus now becomes available and acceptable to all of us.

It's wonderful. You see, the mission of the church is not this grim work of obedience. The work of mission demands the living presence of the joyful Jesus with us.

And the only way that's going to happen is if he is with God and the only way he is there is if he has ascended from earth to heaven. It's why we cannot expect any more resurrection appearances.

During the 40 days he appeared to all sorts of people but now the cloud comes down. Do you remember in the book of Exodus when God rescued his people out of Egypt and he brought them to the mountain and it says the presence of God came down on the mountain and the cloud came down and God called Moses up on top of the mountain and for 40 days Moses was there meeting with God face to face.

The cloud of God comes down. Jesus goes up and all his grace, all his forgiveness is now available to us. That's the first thing the ascension means, that Jesus is accessible to us.

[7 : 53] The second thing it means is that Jesus is now God's king. The ascension is Jesus' enthronement, his coronation. This is how we use the word today.

In 1953, I understand I wasn't alive then but I have reliable records, Queen Elizabeth was crowned. Queen Elizabeth II ascended the throne of England.

It doesn't mean she physically climbed the steps. It means that she took power, that she was installed, that she was publicly recognised as sovereign. This is what we've just said in the creed.

I don't know if you noticed it or not. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

Do you remember back in Luke's Gospel in chapter 20, the Sadducees who wanted to make rubbish of the resurrection. At the end of that discussion, Jesus points them way back to a psalm in the Old Testament, Psalm 110, which says that God says to his son, sit at my right hand until I put all your enemies under your feet.

[9 : 09] This is very important. You see, the resurrection is not just God giving Jesus another chance at life. It's the beginning of the restoration of everything. And in the ascension, it's not just Jesus becomes accessible to us, but he takes up his rule at the right hand of God.

Just, if you've got your Bible open, look across to the right hand side, the bottom of page 113 in Acts chapter 2. This is 10 days later.

The day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has fallen and Peter the Apostle is preaching and explaining the significance of what's happened. Look down at verse 32. This Jesus God raised up, of that we are witnesses, being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father

the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear.

For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, and then he quotes Psalm 110, the Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet.

And here's the conclusion to the sermon. Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

[10:32] Nobody else has been raised from the dead. Yes, there have been a number of people resuscitated back into this life only to die again, but nobody else has ascended to the Father's side and sits in the glory of his majesty.

And Jesus as he ascends, there is a massive change because now for the first time a human being ascends into heaven and sits at God's right hand.

When Jesus came into our world at that first Christmas, he became what he was not, he became a human. And now that he goes to be with God, he remains the fully God and fully man, Jesus Christ. I take it that's why a couple of chapters later, as Stephen is being stoned to death, he looks up and heaven is opened and he sees the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. And I think Jesus is standing because this is the first Christian who dies for their faith and Jesus wants to take him by the hand and lead him into heaven and welcome him. This is the Christian faith.

[11:42] This is what Jesus meant when he said all authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. The ascension means not just that Jesus is accessible but that he rules. And thirdly, the ascension means that Jesus is appointed judge of all.

If you look down at verse 11 again, the angels say, this Jesus who has taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way that you saw him go. In other words, he's going to come again visibly and publicly but the coming one comes because he is the judge of the living and the dead. If you keep your finger in Acts 1 and turn right to Acts 10 for just a moment, I'd like to show you how this works. Acts 10 on page 1, 2, 3.

Now it's the apostle Peter again and he's speaking to a house which is absolutely crammed with people and he explains the wonder of who Jesus is and if you look down at verse 38, Jesus went about doing good and healing people and he speaks about his crucifixion on a tree in verse 39, verse 40, God raised him up, we ate and drank with him, verse 41.

Now here is the question, Peter, what's the core of the message? What's the one thing that Jesus said that you need to teach us and tell us about? What's the one most important thing that Jesus commanded you to say?

[13:13] Verse 42, he commanded us to preach to the people and testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

What did Jesus say is at the heart of the message? That because he is ascended he is the judge of the living and the dead. Now I don't know if you think that's very good news. We don't like to talk about judgment but it is good news because of who it is who is our judge.

I don't want to be judged by someone who doesn't know me. I don't want to be judged by someone who looks on the outside. Actually, I don't really want to be judged by someone who looks on the inside either. I don't want to be judged by you.

I don't want even to be judged by myself. but the one who left heaven to come and seek and save me when I was lost. The one who came not for the righteous but for sinners.

The one who died on the cross bearing sins for my forgiveness. I want to be judged by him. And that's what Peter says in the next verse. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

[14:36] That's why the ascension is like the top of the fireworks. The forgiveness of God. The saving grace of Jesus Christ. Yes, he is judge. Yes, he is Lord. Yes, he is ours. But salvation comes through him.

Well then, let's go back to chapter 1 and finish it off, shall we? I don't know how you responded as you heard it read this morning. I hope you listen to the Bible readings.

They're not just filler. And I hope you're asking the obvious question, why on earth does Luke spend all this space on finding a replacement apostle for Judas?

If you've got any sensitivity whatsoever, you know that we've had pyrotechnics so far, we've had the resurrection, we've had the ascension, and we've had the promise of the Holy Spirit and you see in chapter 2, verse 1, the Holy Spirit comes.

Why do we need verses 12 to 26? Let me ask the question a different way. What would happen if we just skipped this section? Would it make any difference? I don't mean taking out the scissors and cutting it out.

[15:45] I mean, let's just get to the good stuff, to where the Holy Spirit comes down. Why is it that Luke, who's so careful in his writing, gives two verses to the ascension, four verses to the coming of the Holy Spirit, and 14 verses to the choosing of another apostle?

And I think the answer is something like this. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he gave to the world two gifts, not one.

See, we're used to talking about Jesus giving the gift of the Holy Spirit when he ascended into heaven, and that is true, and we'll deal with that another week. But there is a prior gift, a first gift. The coming of the Holy Spirit is the second gift, and the first gift is the church, which is an apostolic church. It's been ordered, given by Jesus in a particular form.

It is the creation of a new Israel. That's why there need to be 12 apostles. And I encourage you to take this passage and read it again this afternoon. Although there's some gory bits in it, there are two main themes that Luke wants us to hold in mind as we look at it.

[16:57] Let me just deal with these two. The first is that the church belongs to Jesus. It's Jesus' church. Remember last week in the first verse we read that in the gospel, Luke says, I've dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.

And now he says, this is what Jesus continues to do and teach after his resurrection. And in verse 2 he refers to the fact that he chose 12 apostles. Do you know there's a difference between disciples and apostles?

Disciples is a word that refers to all those who follow Jesus. There are 120 of them gathered in Jerusalem in verse 15. But there's a little group within the disciples whom Jesus deliberately chooses for a special responsibility and ministry.

And in the gospel Jesus spends a whole night in prayer before he chooses them because you can't self-appoint yourself, you can't choose to be an apostle. Jesus chooses you and they're so important their names are listed in Luke 6.

But the fellowship is broken. Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and in his despair he did not come back to Christ for forgiveness but he takes his own life and we're given some of the lurid details in verses 18 and 19.

[18:16] I don't want to pause long on this but don't you think that Judas is a remarkable picture of sin? I mean Judas had Jesus, the Son of God face to face in person.

He saw him raise people from the dead. He saw him walk on water. He heard his miracles and his teaching but he'd rather have 30 pieces of silver so that he could buy a field with it than have the Son of God.

It's a great picture of how our hearts continually want the good things God gives us but not God himself and the tragedy is that we're willing to betray God for our own selfish purposes and when that happens everything turns to dust in our hands and our life is taken away from us and all the fields that we buy end up becoming our cemeteries.

But if Jesus had chosen the first 12 who is going to choose the replacement? It's the first test to see whether the ascended Jesus is really present.

So what do they do down the last few verses of the chapter? They find two guys who fit the qualifications and in verse 24 they pray and who do they pray to? Verse 24 Lord.

[19:30] They pray to Jesus. They don't pray to God. Lord they say you know the hearts of all men. Show which one of these two you've chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship and then they roll the dice and Matthias gets the job.

Now you may think that rolling the dice after a short prayer would give us much better church leaders than we've historically had and I think you'd be right. But unfortunately this is just a one-off and they're choosing apostles and after the Holy Spirit comes they never do it quite this way again. I'm sorry to tell you that. But the point is that it's Jesus who's choosing this 12th apostle. It's Jesus' church. It belongs to him. If you're reading the text with sensitivity you ought to be saying to yourself how can Peter be leading this group?

How can Peter be leading them to choose someone to replace Judas? Yes Judas betrayed Jesus. Peter betrayed him three times. The point is that it's Jesus' church.

It's not the church of Peter and membership in the church comes about by belonging to Jesus. It doesn't come about by having a spiritual life together. It doesn't come about because you don't become a member of the church because you've got spiritual achievements or spiritual sensitivity or a great track record.

[20 : 55] We all belong to this church as we're about to go through and reenact in a few moments because of the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus Christ. And some of us come to church feeling an utter failure.

I can hardly be here. I feel such a sense of failure. This is exactly where you ought to be. And some of us begin to think we're a success and we forget that we're a failure. This is exactly where you ought to be because the church is made of moral and spiritual failures.

We are those who know the only place we go for freedom and for restoration and forgiveness is Jesus Christ so that the only difference between Judas and Peter is that Peter turned back to the Lord Jesus and received the forgiveness that he offered.

And the most basic manifestation of this sense of dependence on Jesus is prayer, prayer, prayer. I encourage you to pray, to gather and pray.

I think probably we failed at this as a church. This is a bit of an aside but I've got to tell you if the attendance at our prayer gatherings is anything to go by we're much more confident in our own spiritual abilities than Christ's and we're shy of showing our dependence on him.

[22 : 10] I think we failed in this area. We need to ask his forgiveness and seek his face because this church like every true church is Christ's church. It belongs to him. It's not mine. It's not yours.

It's his. Secondly and finally it is an apostolic church. It's easy to miss this. Twelve apostles.

The restoration of the true Israel. And the way that Jesus has constructed the church is that we are built on the foundation of the apostles. This has all sorts of implications.

It means the church is not a democracy. It's not one vote, one voice. We're the body of Jesus Christ. Christ. We are the building of God. And if you choose a democratic model for a church, the church will very descend and become like a mirror of your desires or the desires of the culture. Democratic church gives us the illusion that the church is about me and my needs and my agenda but it's not. It's Christ's. And you know, democracy has a very bad track record in the Bible.

[23 : 19] The world in Noah's day, Tower of Babel, Golden Calf, Choice of Barabbas. We don't elect Jesus.

He is Lord. The church is not ours. It's his. And he has chosen to form it and to create it on the foundation of the apostles. Why? What makes them so unique?

Verse 21, the qualification is spelled out. One of the men who have accompanied us during all the time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us, one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.

They are not just witnesses to the resurrection. Notice please. What qualified someone to be an apostle apart from being chosen by Jesus not just that they were present when Jesus gave a resurrection appearance but they had been with Jesus throughout his ministry right from the start. They had seen his miracles, they had heard him teach, they had been on mission with him, they had been taught by him and trained by him because you see the resurrection by itself doesn't prove anything but if it's this Jesus who is resurrected it makes a very big difference.

[24 : 43] If it's the same Jesus who told the prodigal son parable, if it's the same Jesus who went to Zacchaeus' house, if it's the same Jesus who said I have authority on earth to forgive sins, if he rises from the dead that's something.

And this is the way Jesus set up the church that we rest on the foundation of their testimony. I think that's why in the verses 15 to 17 Peter is so confident in the way he interprets the Old Testament. Where did he get this idea from? Where did he get the idea the scriptures must be fulfilled? Where did he get the idea from that Judas is spoken about in the Psalms? It wasn't the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

It wasn't some special inner insight that he had. He got it directly from Jesus. In Luke 24 that's what Jesus is doing. Now I need to finish but this has so many implications for us.

Let me just give you two or three and you can spend lunch determining the others. Here's one implication. It means that if we're going to be Christ's church we must not drive a wedge between Jesus and the apostles.

[25 : 59] The apostles speak with all the authority and all the spirit power of Jesus Christ. You sometimes hear people say that Jesus taught a simple message of love and universal brotherhood and the apostles came along and muddied the waters, corrupted things.

I want to say it politely but that's nonsense. This is the church of the risen and ascended Jesus Christ and he has chosen apostles as the authentic guarantee of the gospel message and our love for Jesus is measured by our trust in salvation and our practice of the apostolic testimony. That's one significance. Here's another. It means that true apostolic succession is not being able to trace those who've laid hands on you back to some person like Peter. It means that you believe and you teach what the apostles believed and taught. Here's another implication. You sometimes hear the motto, I take the Bible too seriously to take it literally. cute slogan but just a moment's reflection shows you how deeply deceptive it is. Of course the Bible isn't just a collection of facts, it's not a fact book.

[27 : 13] There's poetry and prophecy, there's preaching and there are parables but what people mean when they say that is that we ought not take what the apostles claim as factual. But you know what happens when you take that approach?

You and I become the arbiter of what is true in the Bible. It's like the husband who says I'm not going to take what my wife says literally. She's asked for time. She didn't really mean it, I'll give her money. So you begin to make Jesus in your own image because there's nothing Jesus can say or the apostles can say that can contradict you. All you hear from the Bible is what you want to hear. Well there's some implications. You can work others out. I think the reason Luke has spent so much time on this is that if the church is to remain faithful to Jesus Christ we have to continue to build on the foundation of the apostles. If we move off that foundation we cease to be the church of Jesus Christ. I wrote in the bulletin on the letter this morning something of our situation.

[28 : 21] I want to finish by saying that the risen and ascended Jesus Christ continues to be accessible to us and he loves his church and he cares for his church more than we can possibly imagine.

And he is the one who guarantees our mission. So let's bow and pray to him. As you kneel would you take the wine colored prayer book that you will find in the pew in front of you and turn to page 500 to Psalm 126.

Page 500. Psalm 126. We will read together the first four verses of this psalm as we begin our prayers. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion then we were like unto them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter and our tongue with joy. Then said they among the nations the Lord hath done great things for them. Yea the Lord hath done great things for us already. Whereof we rejoice. Lord Jesus we come this morning as your church wanting to express our gratitude for the work that you have done in our fellowship here at St.

[29 : 50] John's. We begin by recalling your many mercies to us. Like the psalmist we are aware that you have restored the fortunes of Zion first in creating the church of God.

The Israel of God. And restored the fortunes of Zion in making Jesus accessible to all everywhere. To revealing to us that Jesus rules the nations.

And that he will come to be the judge of all. But you have also restored the fortunes of Zion in this place. This is the 31st year since the arrival of Harry Robinson here at St. John's in 1978.

We thank you for those in our midst like Ken and Gail Stevenson, Phillip Owen and others who worked with the search committee that resulted in Harry's appointment.

We give thanks to you Lord Jesus for his long faithful and fruitful ministry in this place. Which brought new life in the gospel to many. Which revived the faith of many people.

[31 : 00] which produced the movement in many more from a nominal to a living and vital faith. So we in deep gratitude give thanks to you for the many years that Harry ministered among us.

Doing the work of a faithful evangelist. The work of a kind and gentle shepherd of your flock. Lord you have indeed filled our mouths with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy.

Lord in your mercy. Amen. Father we give thanks to you for the calling of David Short to succeed Harry as the rector of this church.

And for the many blessings that you showered on us through his faithful preaching and pastoral care. We are deeply grateful for his boldness. For his steadiness and steadfastness under tremendous pressures.

For his humble walking with you in times of testing and opposition. We thank you for the generous and warm support of his wife Bronwyn.

[32 : 10] We thank you for adding others to work alongside David in the provision of Dan Gifford, Jim Saladin, Jim Packer, Terry Fullerton who directs our music ministry.

Ken and Julie Moser in the youth ministry. For the many faithful years of service of Ruth Matheson and so many others, Father, that we could name. We thank you for the many people whom you have added to this congregation in the last 30 years.

Both for those who have been born into families in the church and for the many more who have been born anew by your spirit and to faith in Christ. We thank you for the dozens of people who have come here and then gone out into so many different ministries.

Dozens who have been ordained to pastoral ministry. Dozens who are active in para-church ministries. And scores who serve you faithfully in their daily work in schools, homes, hospitals, offices, and factories.

Father, we thank you for the planting of St. John's Richmond. For the faithful ministry of Sean Love in that new congregation.

[33 : 28] Lord, you have done great things for us. And your faithful provision and protection are things that we want to give you thanks for. Of this fellowship at St. John's, it has been said among the nations and across the land that the Lord has done great things for them.

And we say, the Lord has done great things for us. Whereof we are glad. Lord, in your mercy. Let us read together now the last three verses of Psalm 126.

On page 500 again. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, as the rivers in the south. They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.

He that goeth on his way weeping and beareth forth his seed shall dolethless come again with joy and bring his sheaves with him. Father, we are glad for what you've done.

But as the psalmist says, we plead restore our fortunes like the streams in the south. Father, we have looked back at what you have done.

[34 : 38] We've looked around at what you are doing. We thank you for shepherding your flock here at St. John's. But Father, we long that you will continue to restore us.

That you will, yet again, do a new work amongst us. We are aware that as you lead us, it will require our obedience. It will involve sacrifice.

But we trust that it will be accompanied by joy and fruitfulness. Father, we've planted one congregation. We pray for many other daughter churches to be birthed out of this congregation. So that the barren hearts of many in this area of the lower mainland will come to experience fruitfulness and growth. So that 30 years from now, those still worshipping at St. John's will look back and rejoice that you have used the last 30 years to build a platform on which a great work that will far exceed what you've done in the last 30 years will be accomplished here in our midst. Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy. He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing the sheaves with him. So may it be, Father.

[36 : 07] Lord, in your mercy. Lord, you have commanded us to pray for rulers and authorities. We pray for our prime minister and his cabinet, for the premiers of the provinces and their cabinets, for our city governments.

We pray for those who are sick and who grieve in our midst, for those who are suffering in heart, mind, and body. We pray for those beyond our congregation that we support in ministry, for Catherine Gounet and the North American Indigenous Ministries in Campbell River, for Sharon Thompson, worshipping with us this morning, who has labored faithfully for many years in Burkina Faso in Bible translation, for Brian McConachie in the Ratnak Project in Cambodia, and for Doug and Anna Graham who teach faithfully in China.

Lord, be with these your servants. Encourage them. Strengthen them. May they know that there are people here at St. John's who hold them up faithfully in prayer. Let them see joy and experience fruitfulness in their ministry.

Lord, in your mercy. Amen.