

Easter: 40 Days Later

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Date: 29 April 2012

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[0 : 0 0] Holy Spirit, would you help us tonight as we go into your word to hear what you're saying? We ask this in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.

Well, folks, tonight I have been privileged with the task of speaking to you about the ascension of Jesus. And I'm going to be primarily on our second text there today, Acts chapter 1, verse 1 to 11.

And I'm going to give you my message up front so that if you need to take a nap at some point, because I plan to go for 55 minutes tonight. So if you need to take a nap at some point, you'll already have got the gist of this message.

So here it is. What I'm going to say tonight is this. I'm going to propose that the ascension of Christ is about three things. Number one, it's about the kingdom of Christ.

Number two, it's about the mission of Christ. And number three, it's about the presence of Christ. It's about the kingdom of Christ. It's about the mission of Christ.

[1 : 0 1] And it's about the presence of Christ. It seems to me that within church culture and even popular culture, we are like a tad weak on our understanding of the significance of the ascension for the life of the church.

I'm telling you this as a confession. This is the first time that I put any serious study into trying to figure out what the ascension was about. And Aaron Roberts told me the same thing before the service.

He doesn't know what this is about. That was a joke. Sorry. Tough crowd. But, you know, if you Google images of the ascension, you are going to get like a plethora of painting, like medieval paintings, of like Jesus kind of ascending like a helium balloon up into the atmosphere, you know, into the clouds and out of sight.

Jesus essentially, in most medieval paintings, was the first cosmic astronaut. He ascended into space somewhere and he's still gone.

We never found him. This is kind of based on an understanding of heaven, that heaven is some sort of like spatial location, that if we could just muster up enough rocket propulsion, we could probably get there.

[2 : 2 6] This is not true though. It's kind of like, you know, the popular understanding of the ascension is similar to that scene in the Truman Show.

You ever seen that? Truman Show where Jim Carrey is like paddling out into the ocean and it's like this ferocious storm and he hits the edge of his world. That's kind of how I picture the ascension, like this latch opens up and Jesus kind of ascends into this other world that we can't touch or see.

But somewhere out there, somewhere up there. So it's clear to me that this picture of the ascension is essentially flawed. This is not, Jesus did not go to some spatial location up in the sky somewhere.

It's going to make it tough for all of you who like to look at those medieval paintings. Because heaven is not somewhere up in the sky. It's not a spatial location somewhere.

Heaven is a realm in which God exists. It's God's realm or God's sphere. It's where God exists. Not that God doesn't exist here. But it's kind of like a parallel reality to the world that we live in.

[3 : 34] Okay, I know I'm getting a little bit spooky here, but just go with me. Seems that the Bible believes, the Bible teaches that there are two realms. There's the realm that we live in and then there's the realm of heaven.

And somehow sin tore these two realms apart. And the vision at the end of the Bible in Revelation chapter 21 is that somehow God is going to bring these two realms back together.

And someday they're going to be one. In the book of Revelation it says this. It says, The end vision is this coming together of these two worlds.

The heavenly realm and the realm that we presently live in. Jesus right now resides in the heavenly realm. Jesus did not become the first cosmic space traveler, but rather he entered this realm.

He went into the place where God resides. For some people the ascension is like, sort of like the end of the concert. You know, anyone seen pictures of the latest Coldplay concerts?

[4 : 47] No, well there's like some serious light show and smoke and the band's going crazy. And it's like this grand finale. And Jesus just wanted to go out with a bang and so he did this really cool trick.

Some people see the ascension kind of like this. It's kind of sad though to see the ascension in this way or to see it in such a surface way. Because as one commentator said, Without the ascension, the death and the resurrection of Christ is essentially useless.

Strong words. I better tell you that was John Stott that said that. Because they're so strong that you're not going to believe me. And he's a pretty heavy hitter. So John Stott said that. These are intense words, but I actually agree with him.

I think to minimize the ascension would be like spending thousands of dollars getting an education, studying, spending years of your life trying to get this education. And then when you get out, never pursuing a job.

Without actually landing a job, your education, all of those experiences are essentially useless. It's nice to have a nice little diploma, but it means very little if you don't use it for something.

[6 : 03] The ascension is kind of like this. It's kind of like the detonator for all of the previous activities of Christ. His life, death and resurrection.

It's like this explosion where all of these things kind of come into fruition. The ascension releases all the significance of the events of Easter into the world.

So having said that and cleared up a few, hopefully, maybe I've caused more trouble, but cleared up a few of these popular understandings of heaven, let me now just briefly make three proposals on what I think is coming out of Acts chapter 1 regarding what the ascension is about.

Number one, the ascension is about the kingdom of Christ. The kingdom of Christ. Even today when we talk about a king or a queen coming into a place of power, we would say that they, you know, we could say that they ascended to the throne.

I think this is helpful in remembering what the ascension is all about. It's essentially about the enthronement of Christ. It's Jesus coming into his throne. It's about Christ taking his place as the king of all things.

[7 : 21] In Ephesians, Paul tells us that God raised Christ from the dead and seated him in heavenly places far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named.

God put all things under his feet and made him as head over all things. What he's trying to say is that Christ is a big deal. Christ is king.

I suppose the next question that follows if I'm going to say that Christ is king is, what is the nature of this kingdom of Christ? Where does it function?

What are its parameters? In our text tonight, Nax, we see that the disciples had a certain understanding of this kingdom, of Christ's kingdom.

In verse 6, the disciples say to Jesus, they say this, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?

[8 : 27] In this statement, we see the kind of kingdom that the disciples expected that they were going to get. And for them, it was a geopolitical kingdom.

They had walked with Jesus for three years, and it still seems that the ascension was going to catch them off guard. The ascension was not going to necessarily fit within their paradigm.

They still did not really understand what the nature of the kingdom was that Christ was about to inaugurate.

In their minds, Jesus was going to be a military leader who would lead them into battle to conquer the Romans and set up Israel as a nation who would rule the nations.

So again, what is the nature of this kingdom? When Elizabeth, too, ascended to the throne in 1953, she was given a geographical region which came under her dominion.

[9 : 30] People who reside within her boundaries are her subjects. She's responsible for them. Her dominion is defined and limited by geography.

But it is not so with the kingdom of Christ. Christ rules and reigns not on the basis of ethnicity or geographical location.

His kingdom transcends all of these things. His rulership can be found within the boundaries of every nation on earth.

Whether you're Chinese, Japanese, English, French, Russian, whatever you are, this kingdom lies within His people. This kingdom lies within His people.

The rule of Christ happens as people submit themselves to His lordship and take up His way of life. The disciples were in pursuit of a kingdom that would manifest itself by military might and power.

[10 : 37] What they did not realize is that the way that this kingdom would manifest itself was not through any sort of worldly power, but by the Spirit of Christ working in people to remake them from the inside out, changing their hearts, sanctifying them.

Jesus in the flesh was leaving. By His Spirit, this kingdom would infiltrate every nation and every geographical location in the world.

And it would not be confined by man-made constitutions or political treaties, but it would only be defined by His Spirit. Wherever there are people who submit to the message of the gospel and experience the cleansing that happens from sin, wherever there are people who receive the Spirit, in that place, the kingdom of God is breaking out.

This kingdom cannot be resisted by military force and its king will never be taken captive. That's good news, folks. The one lesson that we can learn from church history, too, is that if you try to kill this movement by some sort of force or political persuasion, if you try to subdue this kingdom by external pressure, it will usually emerge stronger and spread faster than before.

So if you want to wreck or hurt this kingdom, don't try to suppress it. It's a mistake. This kingdom is the people of God, living out the ways of God in real time and space.

- [12 : 20] So when Jesus ascended, He became the king of a kingdom that could not be stopped or halted by temporal power. It's an unstoppable kingdom that resides and emerges from the hearts of men.

Where the Spirit of Christ dwells in a human life and wherever His ways are being embodied and obeyed, there you'll find His kingdom. This is something the disciples really could never have imagined.

Number one, the ascension is about the kingdom of Christ. Number two, the ascension is about the mission of Christ. In Acts 1.8, Christ says, But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

In this text, we can see that after Christ ascends, His plan is that His Spirit would empower His people to carry out His mission.

It's my opinion that this text, along with picking up some things in Isaiah, is also picking up on the ancient idea of a herald.

- [13 : 44] In Rome, when a new emperor came to power, he would send heralds all through the land, the land that he had just taken dominion over, and these heralds would function as witnesses to him taking power.

They would proclaim that the king or the emperor has triumphed and conquered over his enemies. They would call everyone to unify and pledge their allegiance to Him.

The same way that these emperors would send out heralds to proclaim their rulership in every corner of His dominion, Jesus sends out heralds to proclaim His rulership and dominion.

The difference, though, between the emperor and Jesus is that the emperors had dominion over particular locations, and Christ proclaimed dominion over the entire earth.

His gospel is going to go from Jerusalem to Judea to the ends of the earth. What was the message that these witnesses were to proclaim on behalf of Christ?

- [14 : 51] the message is that Jesus has been enthroned as king of the whole earth and He has conquered death, hell, and the grave.

in contrast to the Roman emperor, Jesus did not simply defeat some sort of temporal king, but He defeated that which is more powerful than the most powerful emperor on earth.

He defeated death itself. That is good news. His witnesses were to proclaim that Christ had defeated the power of sin which brought death, and that by putting your trust in Him and submitting to His lordship, you could be freed from the curse of sin, and you could become members of a kingdom that would never end.

it's quite a powerful thought. Jesus gives His followers this message and He says to them, listen, I'm going to give you my spirit which will cause you to witness to my kingdom with power and with boldness as you call people to submit to the king who has rescued them from their greatest foes.

One thing that I would not want you to miss about this particular verse is that this particular verse, folks, is for you and it's for me. If you are one of those who trust in Christ for your salvation, then you too are included in the mission of testifying to the gospel.

- [16 : 32] This means that as you live your daily life and as you trust the Holy Spirit that those you come in contact with and the people that you interact with, you are to be somehow, in some way, a testimony that Christ has ascended to the throne and that He's conquered death.

First of all, the ascension is about the kingdom of Christ. Second of all, the ascension is about the mission and the witness of Christ.

number three, the ascension is about the presence of Christ. The ascension is about the presence of Christ. In the first verse of the book of Acts, it says this, it says, the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and to teach.

The most important word, I think, in this sentence, is the word began. The word began. Why did Luke say, begin to do or began to do and teach rather than saying, I have dealt with all that Jesus did and taught.

Well, Luke uses the word began because from his perspective, the gospel of Luke was not the end of the work and the presence of Christ, with the book of Acts serving as some sort of account of what it looks like to live without Jesus, but rather, Luke wants us to see that the book of Acts is a continuation of the work, the action, and the presence of Christ with us.

[18 : 22] I would go as far as to say that actually when we use the longer title of the book of Acts, which is, you know, the Acts of the Apostles, that we're really making a subtle mistake.

A better title for this book and a title that might more closely reflect Luke's intentions in writing the book would be The Continuing Acts of Jesus.

The Continuing Acts of Jesus. Luke's intention is that whatever we are about to read in the book of Acts is not some sort of dry record of what God's people did when Jesus left them alone.

But rather, it is about what Jesus himself did after he was gone. Jesus himself did after he was gone. To take this a step further, I think it's correct to say that actually what Luke is trying to get us to see through the book of Acts is that the ascension is, listen to this closely, the ascension is not the loss of Christ's presence, but the infinite magnification of it through the lives of his people.

The ascension is not the loss of Christ's presence, but the infinite magnification of it through the lives of his people. The ascension does not signal the removal of Christ from the story of the church, but symbolizes his presence in a new and powerful mode.

[19 : 55] Look at all the stories in the book of Acts. Look at the story in Acts chapter 3. You got Peter and John encountering the beggar.

Silver and gold have we none, but what we have we give to thee. Some good King James that just came out right there. What we have we give to thee. In the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus pops up in the story.

The name of Jesus. Chapter 7. Stephen is being stoned and who appears before him. What's the vision Stephen has? What is Luke trying to get us to see? Jesus appears in the vision as Stephen is being stoned and accepts his martyrdom.

It's a beautiful picture of Jesus appearing. Chapter 9. Paul is knocked down on the road to Damascus and he comes into contact, has a conversation with the living Christ.

Luke's intention is that the reader understands that although Jesus has ascended and he is not present in the flesh, he is in fact working, moving, saving, healing, and restoring.

[21 : 08] Jesus is the unseen character through the whole book of Acts. He's the unseen main character through the whole book of Acts. I think sometimes this is difficult for you and I to comprehend.

I think though that it was also difficult for the disciples to comprehend. I think that's why Jesus ascends, goes into heaven, they see him no more, and then they're standing there looking into heaven going, where did he go?

I mean, their paradigm has been totally destroyed. Jesus was going to become a military leader, they were holding on to him, he rose from the dead, they thought, man, this is game on, this show is back on the road, you guys all thought he was gone, but no, man, we're going to do some damage now.

And then he ascends into heaven, and they're standing there, and it says that the angels basically got to come and rebuke them, say, listen, guys, you're missing the plot, you're missing the plot, but they were hanging on to Jesus, because it's much easier to have someone right here in the flesh, this is human nature.

With Mary Magdalene, do you remember she says to, Jesus says to her, Mary's clinging to him, Jesus says to her, listen, Mary, don't cling to me.

[22 : 33] I've read that before, thinking, well, I guess Jesus didn't want her to touch his new duds or something, like his new resurrected duds, or something, like Jesus didn't want, because he wasn't, I mean, I never really knew what that meant, but what was this all about?

This was not about Mary touching Jesus, all kinds of people touched Jesus, remember Thomas? He touched Jesus, lots of people touched Jesus, what Jesus was saying to Mary is, listen, woman, don't cling to me, because what's about to come, what's on its way, if you'll let go of me, is bigger and better than you could ever imagine, and I'm not going to be further away, I'm actually going to be closer to you, I'm not going to be on the outside, I'm actually going to be on the inside, fascinating stuff, folks, good news, you might be here tonight, and you are a Christian, but you, for whatever reason, do not feel that Christ is near, you might be even right now tonight questioning his presence in your life, well, I want to tell you that Christ is closer than you will ever be able to comprehend, you will not be able to wrap your mind around it, he is closer than he will ever know, and I may not be able to challenge what you feel emotionally, but I can sure challenge your theology, or you might be here tonight, and you are feeling a strange drawing towards Christ, maybe you are someone that has not fully surrendered your life yet to

Christ, you're just checking out this church thing, but you are feeling this kind of like pull towards Jesus, towards church, towards faith, towards something you don't even know, you find yourself sort of like trusting more in this message that's been coming forward, trusting more in what you've heard that Christ has done, let me tell you tonight that there is a really good chance that the ascended king of the universe is after you, and he's closer than you know.

Two things I want you to take home from this message, number one, I want you to pray about what it may mean for you to be a witness for Christ in the lives of your friends and family.

I think it's going to be different for each one of us, but would you be really bold and sometime tonight or sometime tomorrow or whenever, would you pray about what it means for you to be a witness?

[25 : 30] Would you pray about what it might mean for his kingdom to break out through your life to those who are in your world? Number two thing I want you to take home from this message, I want you to think and to meditate on the fact that Christ is gone, but he is anything but gone.

Christ is gone, but he is anything but gone. I want you to ask yourself the question, how would my life change if I believed that Christ was really, really close?

How would my life change if I believed that Christ was really, really close? And as we take communion tonight, would you take a moment to think about the fact that Christ is closer than you know?

Amen. As we respond in prayer, would you sit or kneel and join with me?

Can you hear me okay? Lord Jesus Christ, our victorious and reigning King, we thank you for the good news that we have heard tonight, that you have not only come down from heaven to save us, did not only die on the cross to accomplish that salvation, that you did not just rise victorious from the grave, but that you ascended into heaven in power, and that you sit at the right hand of the Father, and that you are the king over the entire cosmos.

[27 : 47] Lord, give us to receive this good news, the good news that your kingdom has come and that it has no boundaries, that the kingdom, the power, the glory, the dominion is yours forever.

Lord, thank you for making us members of that kingdom, members of your very body, the manifestation of your ongoing presence in the world.

Tonight, we pray that you grant us the grace, the faith, and the boldness to be heralds of your kingdom, your gospel in the world.

Comfort us, Lord, with the truth that your absence is not an absence, but that your presence is among us, is in us, and that we bear witness to your presence in our words and our actions.

Lord, as we have heard this word, we pray that you would also show us this good word as we draw near with faith to your table.

[29 : 21] Make us partakers of the power of the resurrected and ascended Jesus. Make us witnesses, faithful witnesses, to that reality, and give us great hope for the kingdom that has come and yet will come in greater power.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. On this first day, the day of the resurrection, we give you glory, God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, creator of light and light of the world.

We bless you, Lord, who on the first day abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. We give you glory, God, the Holy Spirit, who on the first day filled the praying church with power to be witnesses for Christ in the world.

Jesus, your ascension gives us confidence to draw near to the throne of grace to receive mercy. Search us, O God, and know our hearts.

Try us and know our thoughts. For out of our heart comes evil thoughts, adulteries, murders, thefts, greed, envy, and all kinds of wickedness.

[31 : 08] We conceal nothing from you tonight, Lord. We make no excuses. We pray in your mercy, take away our sin.

Save us, O Lord, from ourselves and from the sins that entangle us. Create in us clean hearts, O God. renew an upright spirit within us.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Lord, hear our prayers for all people. Send the light of your gospel to all nations so that your ways may be known on earth, so that your salvation may be known among all people.

For your holy church throughout the world, we pray. gracious Father, fill it with all truth. Keep it in your peace. Where it is corrupt, reform it.

Where it is in error, correct it. Where it is right, defend it. Where it is in want, provide for it. Where it is divided, reunite it.

[32 : 20] Guide and bless all in authority over us, that we may live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Father in heaven, in your mercy and love, remember our community, our families and loved ones, our friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

remember those who have done us wrong. Remember those who we have wronged. Watch over those whom we have promised to remember in prayer.

Care for those who have no one to remember them. Remember all those who are in affliction or under trial, those who are sick, suffering, and in distress.

express. Give grace to each one according to their need. And may the grace of the Lord our God be upon us. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

[33 : 29] Lord, as we begin this new week, as we are sent out from here to be witnesses to your kingdom, be exalted in us, in all the thoughts of our hearts, of our minds, in the words of our mouths, in the works of our hands, and the paths of our feet.

Be exalted, O God, in all heaven and earth. Amen. Amen.