

## **The Ascension is Good News!**

Acts 1:1-14

Catonsville UMC

May 24, 2020

This is Ascension Sunday. 10 Days before Pentecost is Ascension Day. So today we celebrate that Jesus has Ascended. Are you excited that Jesus has ascended?

I can practically hear the cheers through my screen. Well, I'm happy that you're excited, but I have to admit, I haven't always been excited about it. I was actually rather sad about it. Look, that hymn that says, "And he walks with me..."

I know that. We experience that. But come on! Wouldn't it be better if Jesus were walking with me and talking with me and telling me I am his own in a way that weren't so hard to see and hear sometimes?

Of course it would be! That's what's going to happen in the resurrection-- in the new heavens and the new earth, where all creation is new creation. But we're not there yet.

Jesus' disciples ask him, "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" I love my Jesus but sometimes he has trouble answering a yes or no question. It seems like his answer is essentially, well, no. It's not time for that yet.

Well Jesus, then what is it time for? And is it still good news?

What I've come to understand is that the ascension is good news. Let me explain. On Easter Sunday, Christ conquered death, and new creation exploded onto the scene like a second big bang.

Jesus appeared to his disciples many times over the next 40 days. According to the tradition given to Paul, one time he appeared to more than 500 people at once. And during that time, he taught them many things about the kingdom of God.

After he is risen, there is one thing in particular that he says that, in my experience, often gets overlooked.

Early on Easter morning, Jesus commissions Mary Magdalene. But what he actually says isn't what you might expect. He says, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."'

It's an odd set of instructions, don't you think? You'd think that the instruction would be "go tell them that I am alive!" Right? But instead it's "go tell them I am ascending."

I used to think this was Jesus' way of letting Mary and the other disciples down gently, as if he was saying, "I'm alive, but don't get too excited-- you won't have me back forever." Although it's true that they will be relating to Jesus in a new way, I think it's better to operate on the assumption that Jesus is actually first and foremost giving Mary *good news*.

Tell them "I am ascending," Jesus said. It's good news.

Jesus' ascension means that Jesus has completed the mission from the Father. He glorified God by finishing the work God had given him to do. As a victor returns home once the victory is secured, Jesus returns to where he came from. That's good news.

In the Old Testament book of Daniel, chapter 7, it says "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was

given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

There is “one like a son of man” who approaches the Ancient of Days, that’s God, and is given authority, glory, and power, and he himself is worshipped.

One of Jesus’ favorite titles for himself was “Son of Man.” Jesus’ ascension means that Jesus is who he said he was. The scene prophesied in Daniel 7 takes place in the ascension.

On last year’s American Idol, there was a contestant named Jeremiah Lloyd Harmon who placed sixth overall. He just happened to be a Catonsville resident! Lots of people around Catonsville watched his ascension to stardom with delight. “I know that guy!” they’d say.

Lots of people were more excited about the ascension of an American idol than about the ascension of Jesus. Come on. Dominion and glory and kingship are given to him. You know that guy! He’s walking into heaven like he owns the place with all of heaven saying, “Lift up your heads O gates and be lifted up O ancient doors that the King of Glory may come in.”

Jesus’ ascension is his exaltation as Lord. As Paul says, “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

That’s my Jesus. I know that guy! And he’s worthy of all blessing and honor and glory not only from me but from all creation. Jesus’ ascension is good news!

In 1 John it says, “I’m writing these things to you so that you don’t sin. But if you do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one.” Last week we talked about the Holy Spirit as “another advocate.” We just briefly mentioned that Jesus is the first advocate. He ascended to be that advocate. That is wonderful news indeed!

In the words of Charles Wesley:

He ever lives above  
For me to intercede,  
His all-redeeming love,  
His precious blood, to plead;  
His blood atoned for all our race,  
And sprinkles now the throne of grace

Five bleeding wounds He bears,  
Received on Calvary;  
They pour effectual prayers,  
They strongly speak for me;  
Forgive him, O forgive! they cry,  
Nor let that ransom’d sinner die!

John says, you don’t need to sin. So don’t sin. But if you do sin, you have an Advocate with the father-- Christ crucified, risen, and exalted.

But wait, there’s more! Jesus isn’t done once he ascends to heaven.

On Ascension Day, according to Luke’s Gospel, Jesus told his disciples: “I am sending upon you *what my Father promised*; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then at the beginning of the book of Acts, as Luke sets the scene, he repeats the conversation. It says, “He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to *wait* there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

“Not many days from now,” Jesus says. Jesus builds their anticipation that he is going to deliver on the promise of the Father. God the Holy Spirit is going to come upon them and into them.

It’s no surprise, then that Jesus says, “you will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;” [yeah, I’d think so!] and you will be my *witnesses...*” (1:8). When the Holy Spirit comes, the disciples will receive power to witness to Jesus--the one who is crucified, risen, and exalted. The one who sits at the right hand of God the Father.

For Jesus, the Holy Spirit is not an optional add on. The Holy Spirit is the yeast for the dough of the good news, the dynamite to break down the strongholds of the enemy.

Christian and Missionary Alliance pastor A. W. Tozer once said “If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95 percent of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference.”

The Holy Spirit is not an optional extra. The Holy Spirit is both the goal and the object of our worship. The Holy Spirit is the great gift, promised by the Father. Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer puts it in no uncertain terms: “the saving significance of Jesus' death consists in making possible God's gift of the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit is the purchase of Calvary’s cross, the realization of the new covenant in

Jesus' blood. And he can only be poured out by Jesus when he ascends. And so on the day of ascension, the disciples wait expectantly.

We must wait for the promise of the Father.

Acts 1:14 tells us that the disciples, men and women, wait by praying-- presumably praying for God to fulfill the words of Jesus. You can imagine the prayer: "Father, you said through Ezekiel, 'I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.' You said through Joel, that in the last days you would pour out your Spirit upon all flesh. You said through Jeremiah that you would make a new covenant, saying "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Send your Holy Spirit to us. Give us the power we need to be effective witnesses to Jesus, crucified, risen, and exalted.

Or maybe the prayer was even more simple and focused, directed to the person of the Holy Spirit (himself). Something like, "Come, Holy Spirit!"

This is the point of our "Thy Kingdom Come" prayer that we've been praying since Thursday. Lord, I need the power of your Holy Spirit. I need a deeper relationship with Jesus. "Thy Kingdom Come." I need your power to witness to the good news of Jesus. "Thy Kingdom Come." Bring your kingdom to my friends, to my family members who don't know you. "Thy Kingdom Come."

We can pray these prayers with confidence, because Jesus has ascended. He continues to pour out his Spirit to those who pray and wait. Let's join the disciples over the next week in prayer.