

## ***He Ascended into Heaven***

Luke 24:44-53

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Bobby was a young boy, only five years old, when he went to visit his grandparents for a week. On a beautiful morning, Bobby's grandmother decided to take him to the park. The dew was still glistening on the grass, the flowers were at the peak of their bloom, and the scattered clouds broke the deep blue sky with a brilliant white. As they were taking it all in, Bobby's grandmother remarked, "Look how beautiful this is—it's as if God has painted it all for you, Bobby."

Bobby replied, "Yes, Grandmother, and God did it with his left hand."

"How do you know that?" asked the grandmother, curious about this peculiar observation.

"Because every Sunday at church we say that Jesus went up into heaven and sits on God's right hand."

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Often when we say the Apostles' Creed in worship, we may not really think about what we're saying. Many who are not familiar with the Creed do a double-take when we say that Jesus "descended into hell," and some wonder why we pay homage to the Pope when we say we believe in the "holy catholic church" (which, by the way, is actually a reference to the church universal, not the Vatican). But by and large, when we say the words, it's mostly by autopilot—we don't really think about what we're saying.

Do you know what you're ascribing to when you declare that Jesus ascended into heaven? Surely it must be more significant than the recounting of a mysterious event in which Jesus was suddenly taken up from the earth while his disciples watched in amazement. There must be something more to it than that, especially if it is one of the statements included in the Creed, for the Creed is, after all, a collection of the fundamentals of our faith. What do we mean when we say we believe Jesus ascended into heaven?

On the liturgical calendar of the church, this past Thursday was Ascension Day, one of the holy observances the Protestant reformers chose to keep on our calendar. The observance of the Ascension of the Lord is often overlooked in churches today; it is one of those holy days that will never fall on Sunday, because it is always observed 40 days after Easter. But from time to time we are encouraged to use the scripture lessons for Ascension as our readings for the seventh Sunday of Easter, which is today. And so in today's lessons we have an opportunity to discover the many meanings beneath the simple phrase, "he ascended into heaven."

For one thing, the ascension of Jesus into heaven brings to completion Jesus' work to reconcile us with God. You see, the beginning of the gospel message is the declaration of our separation from God, and it does not end until our human nature is reconciled with God. The gospel begins in the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve through their disobedience have alienated themselves from God. Because of their sin, all human life was banned from the Garden, and God placed his warrior angels—his cherubim—at the gates of the Garden to keep us from coming back in. In our sinfulness, all human life is banned from the physical presence of God.

But in Jesus Christ, God took on human flesh—Jesus was God incarnate. God became one of us, so that in Jesus Christ God could show us who God is in terms that we can understand. As a human being, Jesus was able to take our place on the cross, taking upon himself the punishment that we deserve for our sins. That was the first step of our reconciliation with God. The next step came three days later when Jesus

was raised, in the flesh, and returned to his disciples. But still, our reconciliation was not completed until Jesus ascended into heaven, for it is in his risen, human form that Jesus ascended. The human nature that was banished from the presence of God has now been restored into fellowship with God.

The ascension makes complete Jesus' work of reconciling us to God.

And the ascension was necessary in order for Jesus to be with us in a new way. Luke is the only one who describes the ascension for us, and he does so twice—once at the end of the Gospel of Luke, and once at the beginning of the book of the Acts of the Apostles. And while the details differ, the basic description is the same: Jesus is with his disciples, and he spends time teaching them, and he tells them to wait in Jerusalem until they receive something special. In one account Jesus says “wait for the promise of the Father.”<sup>1</sup> In the other account Jesus said, “Behold, 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.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is referring to the Holy Spirit. And it is through the Holy Spirit that Jesus comes to us and is with us in a way that he could not be with us in human form. Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus' presence was limited to wherever his feet would take him, and no further. But through the Holy Spirit Jesus is able to be with all his believers in every time and place, fully and completely; it is through the coming of the Holy Spirit that Jesus is able to be present throughout the world, not confined by time and space; it through the Holy Spirit that Jesus is able to be “with, within, and amongst us all, no matter where we are scattered, or in what era we live.”<sup>3</sup>

And so in order for Jesus to be with us, he had to leave us. Jesus ascended into heaven.

Still another reason that the ascension is necessary is that it is as the ascended Lord who sits at God's right hand, that Jesus continues to intercede on our behalf. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that Jesus is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is praying for us. Jesus is always at work, seeking God's mercy on our behalf.

Fred Anderson, the pastor of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, puts it this way:

“It is because [Jesus] is there, constantly reminding the Father of the debt he has paid for each of us... that you and I have our sin forgiven. As you and I continue to fall short of the glory for which we were created, as you and I continue to behave in ways that distance us from God, Jesus continues to intercede for us, continues to be our advocate, continues to mediate and reconcile us to God. At your every failure, at my every failure, he is there, pointing to his cross, reminding the Father that it was for you and me.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus ascended so he could continue his work of mediation and intercession.

And Jesus ascended into heaven so that he could prepare a place for you and me. In the Gospel of John, when Jesus is gathered in the upper room with his disciples on the night before his crucifixion, he tells his disciples that he is going ahead of us to prepare a place for us. “In my Father's house are many rooms... I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you may also be where I am.”<sup>6</sup>

That passage from the Gospel of John is one of the most often-quoted passages in funerals and memorial services. It reminds us not only of our hope of a heavenly home, but that heaven is a place where

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:4

<sup>2</sup> Luke 24:49

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Beverly A. Bartlett, “Going, But Not Gone”, May 28, 2006, The Madison Avenue Pulpit, [www.mapc.com](http://www.mapc.com)

<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:34

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Fred Anderson, “Where Did He Go, and Why?”, June 4, 2000, The Madison Avenue Pulpit, [www.mapc.com](http://www.mapc.com)

<sup>6</sup> John 14:2-3

we will dwell with our Lord forever. It's personal. Jesus has gone to prepare a place for you. And Jesus has gone to prepare a place for me. Jesus ascended into heaven, so he could get it ready for us.

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Jesus ascended into heaven. A short phrase, but packed with meaning. John Calvin notes that it is only at his ascension that Jesus truly inaugurates his kingdom. Further, Calvin observed, that "Christ left us in such a way that his presence might be more useful to us...", that "Carried into heaven, he withdrew his bodily presence from our sight, not to cease to be present with believers still on their earthly pilgrimage, but to rule heaven and earth with a more immediate power."<sup>7</sup>

My friends in Christ, though Ascension Day came and went with little or no fanfare, let us not assume that the ascension was an insignificant event. For the truth is, it is a cause for celebration of the triumph and reign of the same One who was crucified and crowned with thorns. It means that because Jesus ascended to heaven, he can now be present with us through the power of the Holy Spirit. It means that because Jesus as ascended into heaven, he is interceding on our behalf. It means that because Jesus ascended into heaven, our dwelling place is being prepared for us.

Jesus ascended into heaven.

That is good news.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, II.xvi.14, Library of Christian Classics, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 522-523.