



Getting Theological: Ascension

Acts 1:1-11

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The Easter season closes out with the Ascension of Christ. After forty days of being present in resurrected form, Jesus ascends into the heavens.

Around Thanksgiving this past November, a video went viral of a pastor ziplining from the balcony of the church down to the pulpit as he began his sermon (perhaps you saw it online?). Pastor Bartholomew Orr of Brown Baptist Church, located near Memphis, Tennessee, delivered the first bit of his sermon in dramatic fashion as he descended into the room, preparing the congregation to hear a sermon that would stress the importance of being ready for Jesus' return. I thought about building a reverse zip line for this morning to create the opposite effect. What better to emphasize the significance of the ascension than living out my boyhood dream of playing Peter Pan on a stage and flying away - ascending into the rafters?

Considering I've nearly killed myself a couple times climbing ladders in this room, I felt it best to not chance fate a third time.

Instead of actually seeing someone physically ascend into the heavens today, you'll have to settle for creating the visual in your mind.

The story of Christ's ascension is one of great importance in our faith, though we give it little attention throughout the year. Unlike the birth of Christ, which gets a full season of preparation and twelve days of celebration ... and unlike the passion of Christ, which get a full season of preparation ... or unlike Easter, which gets a full season of celebration ... the Ascension is often limited in its remembrance and celebration to a single day. The Ascension of Christ, which is marked by scripture to be exactly 40 days after the Easter resurrection, is one of few "holy" days given a special order of service outside of Sunday worship in the Methodist Church. John Wesley believed the church should be celebrating the Ascension on Ascension Day, which would have been last Thursday, May 30.

For as little attention we give the Ascension, it plays a significant role in teaching us about God, about God's desire for the Church, and about Christ's role as the Redeeming second person of the triune God.

Acts 1 sets the stage for us, giving the contextual background and narrative account of the Ascension. The Acts of the Apostles, or Acts as we abbreviate the title of the book, is the sequel to Luke's gospel. Written by Luke, we're told in verse 1 of Acts that the Gospel of Luke was all about what Jesus had done and taught from his beginning until the day he was taken up to

heaven. The book of Acts picks up as Jesus is departing, and it gives us an account of the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, explaining how the Spirit gave life to the creation of the Church after Jesus had ascended.

As Jesus is about to ascend – to physically leave the disciples – there’s a wave of emotion flooding through the minds and hearts of the disciples. They had already faced Jesus’ absence once before. Remember Easter Sunday? Mary showed up at the tomb and, finding it empty, she ran to tell the disciples his body had been taken. The disciples, finding the tomb empty, retreated into a secluded room – fearful, unaware, and unsure of what they would do in the absence of Christ. He wasn’t just dead, he was gone. The emotion of the darkness of the tomb – the fear of a time without Christ – came flooding back over them. What do we do if Christ leaves us?

Their fear is not just for the loss of their rabbi or their friend. Their fear is for the loss of all the hopes and dreams that Christ promised to fulfill. Christ was the one who claimed that the “Reign of God” was coming near. Christ was the one that had said the poor would be lifted up, that the blind would see, that the lame would walk, that the dead would rise again. But from the perspective of those standing before him, very little of this had been accomplished.

Even after all Christ has said, done, and taught them in the three years leading up to the crucifixion, and in all he has said, done, and taught them in the 40 days since the resurrection, “They still anticipated a literal Messianic kingdom patterned after the kingships of the Old Testament.”ⁱ They wanted to know, “Having conquered death, can the risen Lord now establish a new era of Jewish rule comparable to the Hasmonean dynasty or the earlier Davidic-Solomonic dynasty?”ⁱⁱ

As Jesus is preparing to leave them, they are still focused on the powers of earthly kingdoms – they are still interpreting all Christ has said and done as if it was designed for their personal benefit. Verse 6 says, “When they had come together, [the disciples] asked [Jesus], ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?’”

Try as he might, Jesus can’t stop their nationalist desire. This desire is tied in with the desire “of every people to control their destiny and shape the world into their hoped-for eternal image.”ⁱⁱⁱ The disciples, preparing for Jesus’ departure, took a look around and didn’t see that things looked a whole lot different than when Jesus had arrived. What happened to the restoration of power? The Romans are still here occupying our land. The temple leaders still control the Church. There has been no dispersion of power; there has been no reconciliation of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, which so many centuries ago had been dismantled and torn apart.

The power structure has significantly shifted, but not in the way the disciples had long anticipated. See, if the resurrection is just about power, all it does is “turn Jesus into the greatest victor in an eternal competition and produces disciples who follow Jesus only because they worship power.”^{iv} We still struggle with this power grasping today, both within the church

and in our societal structures at large. As Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his book, *Strength to Love*, “one of the greatest tragedies of man’s long trek along the highway of history has been the limiting of neighborly concern to tribe, race, class, or nation.”^v

Jesus rejects such nationalism and tribalism. Jesus responds to their request for the restoration of their national kingdom, “It’s not for you to know the times or periods the Father has set by his authority. But,” Jesus corrects their request, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

They saw Jesus as the power-yielding King, and thought that with his physical presence, they could benefit, both personal and corporately, from such power. Jesus first says, this authority is not for you. It’s not for your gain. It’s not for your tribe. It’s not for your benefit. Christ cannot stay with us, Christ cannot remain in the resurrected form, Christ cannot continue to walk among the people, because in just forty days post-resurrection, the disciples were already claiming his power for their own advantage. Jesus must ascend to break the mentality that as Lord and Savior, he would fit the age-old model of an earthly king, and in doing so, “Jesus instructs the apostles to embrace a different redemptive reality.”^{vi}

Instead of staying and yielding to human desires for self-righteous power, Jesus ascends so that the will of God, the greater purpose of God’s love, and the salvation of the world, ushered in by Christ’s presence, crucified and resurrected, might be fulfilled. Jesus not only corrects their wrongful yearning for self-power, but he names for what purpose such power will be given in the gift of the Spirit to come.

Fear not, the power you long for *is coming*, Jesus says. *The power* is coming in the gift of the Spirit. But it’s not going to about you. It’s not going to be about your gain.

In making this promise, Jesus doesn’t just tell them that the power is coming, he tells the purpose of the power. He gives them a vision for how the power is to be used for the purpose of God’s will. You’ll receive the power, and you’ll be my witnesses here, locally, regionally, and to the ends of the earth. The power isn’t *for* you, it’s not for *your* personal gain, it’s not for the kingdom of Israel, it’s for a much bigger picture that God has longed for and desired from the start. It’s for the love of God to lead all persons into reconciliation with God and with one another – that perfect vision of *shalom* that God created in the beginning.

Rev. Gina Stewart, a Baptist Pastor in Tennessee, summarizes Jesus’ response this way, saying, “The centrifugal love of God ([that is] the love of God radiating outward to all of creation) would be accomplished by a demonstration of God’s love shown through those who believed God, and were obedient to the will of God.” The Spirit is coming for a purpose – to empower *all believers* so that God’s love may be known by *all persons*.

Christ's ascension offers a moment of transition where the disciples are invited to take pause and consider, what is it Christ came for? Why was Christ here? What did Christ teach us? What will such a teach, such a purpose, mean for us?

In a previous church, I got to work with a Lt. General of the Army who once said to me that if there was anything he'd learned in his 40-year career, it was the importance of mastering transitions. He offered that one can be successful in anything they do if they learn how to successfully deal with transitions. From career changes, to changes in business strategy, to changes in life and family, to changes in organizational vision, healthy transitions offer the key to vitality and success.

"The ascension initiates a new era when Jesus is no longer present in the flesh, and when the community looks outward ..."vii This is a new focus for the early believers. They were transitioning from being witnesses of God's love in Christ – from seeing and hearing God's love taught and exemplified - to being empowered as witnesses of God's love in Christ – to share, teach, and live God's love in the greater world.

The shift from Luke's Gospel to the Acts of the Apostles, this transition that is marked by the ascension, is not storyline, it's not purpose, it's not hope, it's not future ... all of Christ's promises remain the same following his ascension. The shift of the ascension, the transition, is the storyteller. The parables, the teachings, the sermons, the admonishing, the healings, the curating ... the one who lived the story of God's love, the one who instructed God's desire for the world, the one who was God's divine presence in the world is giving way and distributing the power of such a task to all who believe, so that all *may* believe. Those who believe, those who will be gifted with the power of the Spirit, "will give room to *the witness*, making their lives a stage on which the resurrected Jesus will appear and claim each creature as his own, as a site of love and desire."viii The ascension is not about a decrease in the witness of God in the world, it's about an increase, by multiplying the witness throughout the world among all believers. Christ's ascension is not about a decrease of God's power in the world, it's about an increase in God's power, with the power being gifted to all who profess the name of the Lord.

Willie James Jennings, a Professor of Theological Studies at Yale Divinity, offers that "Jesus ascends not only to establish presence through absence, but he also draws his body into the real journeys of his disciples into the world."ix He continues, "[Christ] ascends for our sake, not to turn away from us but to more intensely focus in on us." The world is too great and too large for God to give Christ for the benefit and glory of any one people, Christ comes and goes for the salvation and the glory of God among all peoples – a truth which will be made known through the witness of all believers, empowered by the Spirit.

As our text begins to conclude, as the disciples enter into this transitional period between the Ascension and Pentecost, they were watching as Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. Verse 10 and 11 say that while they were looking up into heaven, two men dressed in white appeared before them and asked, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?"

Such is our normal response when transition occurs. We stand, perhaps with gaping mouths, staring at what we knew, at what we enjoyed, at what we created, at what we thought we wanted, at what we thought was going to be best for us as it drifts away, and we are left fearing what will happen next. Such is the call of the Ascension to the reality that Christ has not come for our gain, and Easter was not a celebration of God's work for *our* glory. There is nothing about what Christ offers, or what God offers through Christ, that is designed for our personal glorification. The transition at the Ascension is reality check for the disciples – this new thing, this glory of God, this power of the resurrection, this conquering of death, this new earth and new creation, the new life offered, and the promise of eternal life ... ain't none of it for your glory. This is all about God's revelation of eternal love. This is all about God's desire for the reconciliation of all persons to be accepted, embraced, and welcomed as God's beloved creation. This is all about the perfection of creation that God desired in the Creation.

The Ascension is a promise that God's work does not end with Christ, but has just begun, and that we will be empowered to be a part of it. Our lives, our exemplifying God's grace, our witnessing to God's love are part of something much greater, they are part of God's loving action for the world. The Ascension is worthy of celebrating – it's a transition worth pondering – it's a glorification of God's eternal love – and we ... you, and me, and all who desire to join ... are invited to prepare ourselves to be sent with the power of the Triune God to be a part of making sure everyone is a part of God's grand action. For the glory of God's will and love among all creation, Christ ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God. Amen.

ⁱ Gina M. Stewart. Theafricanamericanlectionary.org. Retrieved May 29, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Carl R. Holladay. *Acts: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willie James Jennings. *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Belief)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Stewart.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Richard M. Landers. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

^{viii} Jennings.

^{ix} Ibid.