

LUKE 24:50–53. (EHV)

He led them out as far as the vicinity of Bethany. He lifted up his hands and blessed them. And while he was blessing them, he parted from them and was taken up into heaven. So they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. They were continually in the temple courts, praising and blessing God. Amen.

As a child, I can remember wondering from time to time why Jesus’s ascension was the theme of a Christian festival. Why did we celebrate the fact that Jesus left us visibly? It seemed like we were basically saying, “We can’t go visit Jesus. We can’t look at him and see the kindness on his face and in his mannerisms. We can’t talk to him and see for ourselves how he listens to us. We can’t present our problems and difficult questions to him in person and get his wise and perfect answers from his own lips. We can’t witness him performing one of his miracles. We can’t do any of that—hey, let’s celebrate!”

I had grown out of that stage by the time I attended college, but it still was like a slap upside the face when I heard one of my professors, the man I respected most after Jesus and my own father, tell us in class one time that Ascension was his favorite church festival. Ascension? Not Christmas? Not Easter? Ascension?! What was I missing?

I’m guessing I’m not the only one who has had thoughts like these. Now I’m not under any delusions that I’m going to make Ascension the favorite festival for all of you this morning; I’ll admit it’s still not mine. But I do want to review with you this morning what the Scriptures say that Jesus’s ascension means for us. After all, Jesus’s ascension led the original disciples who witnessed it to worship him and return to Jerusalem with great joy. It will certainly do the same for us. It will lead all of us to worship Jesus for his ascension, and it will make us that much more eager and joyful to celebrate it.

What we heard from Acts earlier is the fullest account of Jesus’s ascension in the Bible. Luke also records a shorter version of this event at the end of his Gospel, which I just read. Mark also records an even shorter summary of it at the end of his Gospel. Taken together, we learn that forty days after he rose from the dead, Jesus took his disciples out to the vicinity of the village of Bethany on the Mount of Olives, just east of Jerusalem. He lifted up his hands and blessed them, and while he was blessing them, he was taken up into the sky in their sight, until a cloud took him out of their sight. At some point after being hidden from their sight, he passed from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

So what does this mean for us?

For starters, it means that Jesus had completed his work on earth. The apostle John tells us that “the reason the Son of God *appeared* was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). So if he has now *disappeared*, that work must be completed, that is, the devil’s work must be destroyed. Jesus himself said that he *came* to seek and to save what was lost (Luke 19:10), so that must be done if he has now visibly *left*. On another occasion he said, “I have come down from heaven, not to do my will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me: that I should lose none of those he has given me, but raise them up on the Last Day. For this is the will of my Father: that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him may have

eternal life. And I will raise him up on the Last Day” (John 6:38–40). So the fact that he has now gone back up into heaven means that these things are true: Jesus has lost and will lose none of those the Father has given him, but will raise them up on the Last Day. And everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him will have eternal life and be raised on the Last Day.

Psalms 68 also underscores this. There David prophesies, “You ascended on high. You led captivity captive.” The picture is of Jesus arriving in heaven leading a triumphal parade, and in the train of his parade is every being and power that had held us captive or that would threaten to hold us captive. Sin, death, the devil, and hell are hanging their heads and shackled in chains. Their control over us is broken. They are utterly defeated.

We also have a hint about this in the account itself. While other places in the Bible refer to this event as Jesus’s ascension, the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts do not use that word. They both say that Jesus was “taken up.” That’s a passive verb which implies that someone was taking him up. It’s kind of like how the Bible speaks of Jesus actively rising from the dead, but also of his passively being raised by God the Father from the dead. Jesus ascended into heaven, but he was also taken up by God the Father into heaven, which means that God must have considered his Son to have accomplished everything he sent him to do, and that he approved of it, so that now he was now receiving his Son back into his proper home. If he were still here, we’d be left to wonder, “Is there still something left for him to do? And if so, has he proved conclusively he is the Messiah?” But he has ascended. There is nothing left. He is the Messiah.

Second, Jesus’s ascension from earth to heaven also stresses for us what he told Pontius Pilate during his trial: His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). His kingdom is spiritual, not physical. Following Christ doesn’t mean riches, fame, and earthly prosperity beyond our imagination. His kingdom is heavenly, not earthly. It won’t die or even diminish if, for instance, the United States should fall. His kingdom is a kingdom of faith, not a kingdom of sight. It is a kingdom where we must take him at his word, not find him on the basis of what we can prove by our reasoning and senses.

This account, like the other highlight accounts of Jesus’s life and ministry, also proves that Jesus is the Son of God. Can you imagine being there with the disciples, watching and listening to Jesus bless you, and suddenly he just starts rising off the ground into the air? He effortlessly ascends higher and higher, until a cloud gently slides underneath him and hides him from sight. It’s like something out of a superhero comic, but it happened in real life more than 1,900 years before the first superhero comic appeared. It’s something that someone could do only if he was divine and had divine powers. Jesus clearly was divine and had divine powers.

Psalms 47 tells us that when Jesus passed into the heavenly realm, he was welcomed with heavenly shouts of joy and the sound of the ram’s horn. The apostle Paul says that God then seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms (Eph. 1:20). Now since heaven is a spiritual place, not a physical place, the right hand of God is not a physical location. Some have argued that, for instance, Jesus cannot be present in the Lord’s Supper because he is seated at the right hand of God. You can’t be in more than one place at once, right? But by that same reasoning, we would have to say that Jesus was lying when he said he would be with us always to the very end of the age (Matt. 28:20). He can’t do that if he’s at the right hand of God, right?

No, the apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Ephesians exactly what the right hand of God means: “[He] seated [Christ] at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion, and above every name that is given, not only in this age but also in the one to come. God also placed all things under his feet and made him head over everything for the church. The church is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Eph. 1:20–23). Paul tells us here that the right hand of God is the place of supreme power and authority. Christ’s ascension means that he now rules over everything both as God and as a glorified human being for the good of the Church, namely the body of all those who believe in him as Lord and Savior.

This truth is more and more comforting, the closer we get to the end of the world. Every day it seems that there’s some shocking new story in the news, of humans defying and degrading one standard of truth and morality after another. Here are just a few headlines I saw this week. I am not speaking to the truth or bias of these headlines, just noting that they are there: “San Francisco Slammed For Spending Millions Of Dollars For Vodka And Beer For Homeless Alcoholics.” “The ‘Experts’ Push Bird Flu As the Next Pandemic.” “Transgender Person Runs Man Over, Kisses Him, Repeatedly Stabs Him.” And I am deliberately omitting any headlines involving the presidential candidates for the upcoming election, and, as you may be aware, there is more than one of those. I’ve never heard so many fellow Christians express genuine disgust about the present state of our country and genuine fear about its future as I have just the past few years. It seems like the world is spinning out of control, devolving into unbridled chaos.

But Jesus’s ascension assures us that that’s not true. Everything is firmly under the control of Christ, who is gathering his Church through the gospel, punishing wickedness and evil, and bringing the world to its end in his own time and way. He has a plan and he is putting it into practice. We don’t have the assurance that his plan benefits us if we don’t remain in his Word, but if we do remain in it, we do have that assurance. He rules everything for our good. Nothing in the universe happens without his say-so, without the say-so of the one who has led captivity captive, who has crushed death and the devil beneath his feet, and has done so for us.

In that same vein, the apostle Paul also says that the ascended Christ is equipping and sending out public ministers of the gospel to preach and teach the gospel and to train the saints for the work of serving, thereby building up the body of Christ, until the Church takes the full, mature shape that Christ has in mind for her (Eph. 4:10–13). This is another reason it isn’t true that we can’t talk to Jesus and see how he listens to us, or that we can’t present our problems and difficult questions to him in person and get his wise and perfect answers from his own lips. We not only have his word, but we also have the faithful public ministers and representatives he continues to send to preach and teach his word. Jesus told his disciples before sending them out, “He who listens to you, listens to me,” and that remains true, even more so now that he has ascended. The faithful pastors, Sunday School teachers, Vacation Bible School teachers, elders, and others that you have had are some of the proofs that Jesus is ascended and sitting at the right hand of God the Father.

Paul also tells us in his letter to the Romans that the ascended Christ is interceding for us (Rom. 8:34). Maybe when you were younger, you had a sister wrongly scolded by your parents, and you spoke up for her. Maybe you’ve had a classmate wrongly accused of cheating on an

assignment at school, and you spoke up for him. Maybe your husband rightly issued a disciplinary sentence for one of your children, and you spoke up for your child to get it commuted to something less harsh. That's interceding. That's what Christ does for us. He speaks up for us before God the Father. I imagine him showing his Father the nail marks in his hands and feet and the scar in his side and saying, "Look, this is what you had me, your only-begotten Son, go through for them! Deal with them in grace, patience, and blessing."

Now the one shortcoming of this imagined scenario is that it could give the impression that God the Father is out to get us, trying to hurl lightning bolts down from heaven at us, and Jesus has to dodge this way and that to block them, while he pleads with him to please calm down. That's not how it is. Remember, God the Father is the one who so loved the world that he sent his Son to save us. So Jesus interceding for us at God's right hand is really just an extra layer of assurance that God is not against us, but for us, and that all he does for us and all he allows into our lives, he does for our good, not to punish and destroy us.

Finally, Jesus told his disciples on Holy Thursday that he was going to heaven to prepare a place for them in the rooms in his Father's house (John 14:2-3). How wonderful it will be to see the place prepared for us by Jesus, the one who was raised by a carpenter on earth, the one who invented carpentry long before that, yes, the author of design itself, the one who knows us better than we know ourselves! As the angel told the disciples as they stared into the sky, "This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." That will happen on Judgment Day, when Jesus will gather all those who have believed in him, who endured in repentance and faith to the end in spite of the many difficulties, struggles, temptations, and obstacles, and he will take them to the place he himself has prepared for them in glory.

Jesus's redeeming work on earth is finished. Jesus's kingdom is not of this world. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is ruling over everything for our good at God's right hand. Jesus is equipping and sending out public ministers of the gospel. Jesus is interceding for us. Jesus is preparing a place for us. Not bad for one Christian festival, huh? No wonder the disciples worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

Jesus ascended into heaven while he was blessing his disciples to assure them, and to assure us, that in heaven at God's right hand he is blessing us still—blessing us from the most powerful position in heaven and on earth, blessing us in time and blessing us for eternity. A happy and blessed Ascension festival to you all! Amen.