

Today in the church calendar it is Ascension Sunday. Acts 1 tells us that after the resurrection Jesus appeared to the apostles he had chosen over a period of 40 days and then He was taken from their sight. Thus Ascension falls 40 days after Easter – which is a Thursday, but we celebrate it on the Sunday after. It is an extremely important event in the life of Jesus and in the life of the church and yet it gets only a passing mention in today’s church. For that matter, many of us who grew up in Pentecostal circles have no idea that there’s a day for it to be celebrated at all. We tend to skip over it and focus on Pentecost Sunday – which is next week. Ascension sounded like a high church thing. Pentecost was the day of our people. However, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost are all linked and are each one important both separately and collectively. As we begin this morning I want us to recite together the Apostle’s Creed to call our attention back to the fundamental things that we do actually believe about God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit even if we don’t give them all equal attention or thought.

Will you stand as we read together:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy, apostolic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

You can be seated.

This is what we believe – Jesus died, rose again, ascended, and sent us the Holy Spirit. Paula Gooder is an author and teacher and a theologian in the Church of England. In her book, “This Risen Existence: the Spirit of Easter,” which I’ll refer to a few times this morning, she writes, **“This four-link chain then – death, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit – is the underpinning of our Christian existence. What difference does it make to our lives today? The**

answer, it seems to me, is every possible difference. A life lived in the acknowledgement of resurrection, ascension and Pentecost is one that cannot remain unchanged. We are called to see the world with new eyes, to live our lives transformed in Christ and inspired by the Spirit.” – Paula Gooder

With that answer in mind let me ask 4 more questions that are very general and broad and then attempt to answer them.

What is the ascension? For that answer we turn to Acts 1. Luke, the doctor turned writer, is the author of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. He begins the book of Acts by reminding Theophilus, whom the book was written to, of his other book. The concluding verses of the book of Luke are about the ascension and that is also where Acts begins.

Read Acts 1:1-11

From that recounting of the event we know:

- **It happened 40 days after the resurrection**
- **He was taken from them**
- **He went up**
- **He was hidden from their sight**
- **He would return, but not right away**

These are the facts, but what do they mean? The early church applied the fancy word, ascension, to this event because “the great taking up” didn’t sound as good. Scripture gives us this idea that the heavens are directly above the earth. God made the heavens (above) and the earth (below). In the days of Noah floodwaters were sent to destroy life under the heavens. Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 was built up in order to reach the heavens. The heavens send rain so it would have to be above. The Psalmist says God parted the heavens and came down and that God’s love is as high as the heavens. The Apostle Paul says that Jesus ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the whole universe. So, it made sense that Jesus went up. However, all of us who have ever begun our ascent at takeoff in a plane have also gone up into the clouds. Yet we didn’t see anything matching the description of heaven when we did. The space age has given exact calculations to just how high the

heavens are above the earth and how wide our universe is. Space shuttles have left our planet and seen others. For some this has cast doubt on the location of Heaven. But to focus on where Jesus has gone up to is to miss the fact that He has gone. Ascended, by definition, means He went up, but the angels on the very day He went up redirected the focus. "Why do you stand here looking into the sky?" was their question that day. Trying to figure out where exactly the heavens to which He has gone are located is not the task to which you or I nor the disciples have been assigned. Acknowledging that He has gone and has assigned a huge task to be His witnesses is the point and it's one of extreme importance. When we talk about ascension this morning don't get hung up on the wrong part.

Additionally, we must recognize that the cloud was a symbol of God's glory and presence. When the people of Israel were led out of Egypt it was a pillar of fire at night and a pillar of cloud by day that led them. When the cloud moved they moved. When the cloud stopped they stopped. God came to speak to Moses in a cloud – Moses steps into it and is covered from the people. The cloud would cover the tabernacle and God's glory would fill the place. In the New Testament God spoke from a cloud at Jesus' baptism and at the Transfiguration a cloud covers the mountain and all of a sudden Moses and Elijah show up and God again says Jesus is His son. It was a super weird moment for Peter, James and John. At the ascension in Acts it is a cloud that hid Him – it seems as if it was God receiving Jesus into His presence or that Jesus was being enveloped by a cloud of God's glory. It's also possible the disciples were still standing there looking up because of their experience on the mount of Transfiguration – we've done this before, but when the cloud moves Jesus will be there. Only this time it was different. This time Jesus was physically gone from their eyes, yet spiritually present in their hearts. Jesus is hidden to them by God's glory. To sum up:

1. What is the ascension? It's the moment that Jesus was taken from them. We only have a few short verses that describe the event. Where did He go? He went to Heaven where He sat down at the right hand of the Father, which is what the rest of the New Testament will affirm. Where is Heaven? Well, that's the wrong question for Ascension Sunday. The second bigger question we will attempt to answer -

2. What did the ascension mean for the disciples?

This moment meant several things for them. It meant -

- **Motivation**

Again quoting from Paula Gooder, **“The resurrection offers us transformation in Christ, the ascension gives us the motivation to act, and Pentecost the ability to do it.”** – Paula Gooder After the resurrection Jesus had appeared to His disciples and I’m sure they thought things would be returning to normal. He’s back and now we can continue traveling with Him as He teaches and preaches and heals the sick and brings freedom to the oppressed and makes the blind to see. As long as Jesus was present they could rely on Him to take the lead, get the job done, and fix their mistakes. There’s a story that Mark tells in his gospel about a boy who was demon possessed whose father brought him to the disciples. They were unable to drive out the demon so he brought him to Jesus. Jesus drives out the spirit and then the disciples ask Jesus why they couldn’t. His response was that this kind can come out only by prayer and fasting. As long as Jesus was physically present they could just send the “hard cases” on to Him, but if He’s gone they’ll need to start praying and fasting!

I know we have college students home for the summer and they can testify to the motivation that comes when mom is no longer physically present where they live. At home you might not have been as fully motivated to learn how to do the laundry because in the end mom was going to do it. So at home if you took that shirt off the hangar it was going into the dirty clothes pile, but when she’s not there you’re highly motivated to keep your clothes spill free and discover you can wear that multiple times before it needs washing! We’re motivated to do more when we’re the only ones to do it.

The ascension provided that motivation. Jesus will come back, but He wasn’t coming back to do what He had now assigned His disciples to do. They would have to take on His mission. Acts 1 tells us after the angels appeared they snapped out of it and walked back to Jerusalem where they had been instructed to wait and they got busy! The disciples began to put into practice what they knew from Jesus. Well, when He started His ministry He spent time in prayer and then He called disciples. So they

went back to where they were staying and **“They all joined together constantly in prayer.” Acts 1:14** and then Peter stood up and said it was time to choose another disciple to fill the vacancy left by Judas. They chose Matthias. Jesus ministry began with prayer and the calling of disciples, and the disciples now follow that exact pattern as the ministry of the church begins. It was the ascension that gave them the motivation to begin that season of ministry.

- **Absence**

The ascension was also about absence. **“After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.” Acts 1:9** He’s gone! But, if Jesus hadn’t been physically absent the promised Holy Spirit wouldn’t have been sent. Jesus said, **“It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” John 16:7** When Jesus had commanded them to go out and begin the work of making disciples and baptizing them and teaching them to obey He had also given them a promise **“And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:20** At the Ascension Jesus is hidden from their eyes, but not from their spirit. Through the Holy Spirit He is still present with them. But, again if Jesus had remained physically present on the earth the disciples would not have needed to step up and begin the work He had prepared them to do. Most of us are content to let someone else do the work that needs to be done. So long as someone else is working in that role then I don’t need to. This week it’s Pastor Brittany and me holding down the fort. If Pastor Phil were here he’d be preaching and if Pastor Jeff or Pastor Brian were here one of them would have taken up the offering in this service. I wouldn’t come up here and say hey move over or give me that mic I’m ready to speak or preach instead of you if they were here, but when they’re all absent on the same day then I become a one-woman show! The only reason I’m standing here all morning is because someone else is absent. If Jesus were still here we wouldn’t need to be about His business. Absence can be highly motivating. It was Jesus absence that created the space and the motivation they needed to fulfill the mission.

- **Mission**

It would be another 10 days before Pentecost when they received the promised gift. The Holy Spirit brought the power and the ability for them to function and fulfill the mission in His absence. Jesus last words to His disciples were a strategy for putting into action what He'd been commissioning, commanding, and practicing with them for years now. Stay in Jerusalem to receive the needed power and then **“Be my witness in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes.” Acts 1:8-9**

The mission gets real as they realize it's just us. The angel appears and tells them He's not coming back today so go on. Jesus spent 3 years teaching and training them, He dies for the salvation of the whole world, God raises Him from the dead, and now He's ascended into Heaven and the rest of the plan for the redemption of mankind lies with these disciples who are standing outside Jerusalem staring into the sky. It's all dependent on whether or not this group will choose to accept the mission. No one else will do it – no one else is witness to all they have seen and heard – no one else is coming. The mission to spread this gospel to the ends of the earth lies solely with them.

- **Witness**

When they choose another disciple later in Acts 1 the criteria was **“It is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” Acts 1:21-22** They were looking for an eyes witness of the resurrection and the ascension – they went hand in hand. In another week Peter will stand and proclaim the gospel, **“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God.” Acts 2:32-33** In chapter 3, again Peter stands to preach the gospel, **“You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.” Acts 3:15** A few verses later in the same sermon Peter says Jesus must remain in heaven. Again it was the resurrection and the ascension that were coupled. Jesus wasn't there for them to parade out and show proof – they had to be his witness – we saw Him. We saw Him buried, we saw Him resurrected, we saw Him ascend to heaven – saw it with our

own eyes. They knew what had happened and they knew where Jesus was at that very moment because they were eyewitnesses. If they didn't bear witness – if they didn't testify to what they had seen and heard – no one else would and the truth of Jesus would have died with them. This was knowledge too big to keep to themselves. **The ascension created a physical absence and the motivation to take up the mission and be His witnesses to everyone who would listen.**

3. What did the ascension mean to Jesus?

“The impact of the ascension on the disciples was that of absence. The other side of the coin is the affirmation of Christ's divinity in heaven seated on God's throne.” – Paula Gooder In Acts 7 Stephen, a leader in the church, was stoned to death because of His faith in Jesus. Just before he died he **“Looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” Acts 7:55** Paul says in Romans that Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for us, in Ephesians 1 we read that God seated Christ at His right hand, in 1 Peter 3:22 we read that the resurrection of Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him – is what saves us. We see this same language in several other passages as well. It is an indication of power, submission and authority that has been given to Jesus by the Father and it speaks to His current role as an advocate on our behalf. One last time referring to Paula Gooder but she says for Jesus the ascension is about homecoming. The Apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 2 that Jesus, who was in very nature God, left heaven and humbled himself to take on the appearance of man and died on the cross.

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place.” Philippians 2:9 Christmas celebrates Jesus coming to earth, Ascension celebrates Him returning to Heaven. The prophet Daniel prophetically saw this take place, **“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.” Daniel 7:13-14** Jesus was fully man, but He was also fully God and

Ascension reminds us of that divine nature. It reminds us that though He took on flesh it never saw decay because God raised Him from the dead and exalted Him and seated Him at His right hand. Paul writes, **“I pray also that they eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know...his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.”** Ephesians 1:18-21 For Jesus the ascension meant ascending to His rightful place of power and authority at the right hand of Jesus where He now ever intercedes on our behalf.

4. What does the ascension mean to us?

The ascension means that Jesus is the Son of God. He is who He said He was. It shows that He was exalted by God and given a place of honor.

It means that One who sympathizes with our weaknesses – having been tempted in every way just as we are but was without sin – is now speaking to God on our behalf so that we can approach God with confidence that we will find mercy and grace in our time of need.

But, it also means that in His 2,000 year absence it is still up to those of us who can testify to the life change that Jesus brings to continue being His witnesses.

The ascension is still the motivation we need to share the good news of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. No one else is going to do it! I said a few weeks ago that the Christian faith is still only one generation from dying out. If we don't continue to tell the story, if we don't continue to obey His commands to make new disciples and love others, if we don't bear witness to what we've experienced then the message of the gospel dies with us and our generation.

It is still the motivation we need to get connected at Carbondale. It provides the motivation to go into all the world and preach the good news. The ascension shouts to us – you're it! It's your turn to go and do likewise.

The ascension means the baton has been passed – from Jesus to the disciples to the early believers to the next generation to the one after that to our grandparents and

our parents and the generation above us and now it's in our hand. Bear witness that the death and resurrection of Jesus matters. Testify that it changed everything. Share that it still has the power to transform. Proclaim and shout the good news near and far to every person – Jesus died for my sin and He rose again to prove it was all true and He ascended to the Father and sat down at His right hand and is praying for you. **The absence of Jesus on earth provides the motivation for us to take on the mission and be His witnesses to the very ends of this earth.**

There's one more question this morning, but it's one you will have to answer for yourself: What will you do in His absence?

Let's pray.