

I BELIEVE IN POWER ON HIGH

Credo Series (Part 3) | Text: Acts:1-11

We Wonder Why Jesus Left

I want to talk with you today about one of the least understood, most under-appreciated lines in that famous statement of faith that we call the Apostles' Creed. To set the context for this, I want to take you to a scene recorded in the Book of Acts chapter 1. It's been about forty days since Jesus was resurrected. He's been interacting for several weeks with his disciples, preparing them for the ministry they are going to have in the years ahead, but they are struggling to get what He has in mind.

The evidence that they don't get it is in Acts 1:6, where we read: **Then [the disciples] gathered around [Jesus] and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)** After all their time with him, the disciples still think that Jesus has come to throw out the tyrannical power of Rome and re-establish Israel as an independent political kingdom. But Jesus had His eye on a much greater revolution. *Christ's aim was nothing less than to throw out the power of sin and establish His kingdom in every human heart.*

Because the first disciples WERE still missing it, Jesus went on to say to them on that day long ago: **It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority (Acts 1:7).** By that He meant: It is not for you to know when God will finally and fully restore his whole creation. But here's what you can know and trust in: **You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you...** The change in power you guys keep looking for out there, I want to give you in here, so that **You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).** **After he said this, Jesus was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight (Acts 9).** Or, as the Apostles' Creed would soon put it: *He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty.*

When our oldest child was little, one of his simple joys was obtaining a helium balloon. Did any of your kids love those too? You might as well have given him a flying puppy on a leash! It was a guaranteed thrill, until he lost his grip on that string. In a nanosecond, the moment would go from delirious joy to total meltdown as that balloon rose up and up and up and out of sight. As parents, we soon learned to TIE the string on his wrist! But the first time that balloon went up? NOT a good family moment!

When I picture those disciples gazing up as Jesus went away, I think it must have been a rough family moment. I should tell you that we have no real idea whether Jesus "ascended" in the way that a helium balloon does. The biblical text simply says that **"he was taken up"** and that **"a cloud hid him."** Scripture often uses the word "cloud" to

suggest the presence of an enveloping mystery.¹ The statement that Jesus was “taken up” could just as easily mean that he disappeared as that he rose vertically.

Any way you understand the imagery here, if I were one of those disciples, the moment would be rough. Like a kid leaping to grab a disappearing string, I’d want to say *“Wait, Jesus, come back! Don’t leave us!! This job you’ve given us... it’s too BIG! We can’t do this without you!”* Can you understand that? Have you ever felt like maybe it’s a BAD thing that Jesus **“ascended into heaven”** and left all of us here without him? I can think of a few people who would improve the world by leaving it, but not so with Jesus. How’s it not like a great coach leaving her team on the verge of the championship game or a general retiring on the eve of the revolution he planned?

As natural as that sentiment is, this is not the way that centuries of Christians thought about it. Do you know that for centuries, Ascension Day (which was this past May 13) was a holiday as major as Christmas or Easter? It was a moment that followers of Jesus wanted to remember and celebrate. In some parts of Europe, it is still a national holiday, though most don’t think much about the roots of that tradition. These days the Ascension (if it is mentioned at all) gets lost somewhere between Easter and Pentecost. So, why did earlier Christians make such a big, positive deal about the Ascension?

Why Is the Ascension Good News?

The FIRST reason the Ascension is good news is because the departure of Jesus signals the arrival of the Holy Spirit. In one of his final conversations with his disciples, Jesus said: **Very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you (John 16:7).**

Think about this: As long as He was physically present on earth, Jesus could only be in one place, with one group of people at a time. But when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, Jesus could now be with anyone anywhere. He’s with me right here, and with you over there, and with Christians all over planet earth – teaching us His word, comforting us in our pains, empowering us with gifts every bit as significantly as the earthly Jesus once did with only a small band of disciples in one country of the world.

If you need empirical evidence that this is true, consider this: More than 2,000 years after Jesus ascended into heaven, leaving behind just twelve people to start his revolution, there are now 2.382 billion people who call themselves His followers -- many of whom will meet together somewhere today to listen for His teaching, to draw on his comfort, to be filled afresh with his power. And that doesn’t count the billions of more people that Jesus met, shaped, and brought into an eternal relationship with God through his Holy Spirit in generations before ours. Thank God that Jesus ascended.

But remember, Jesus didn't just go up or disappear. He went somewhere particular. **He ascended INTO HEAVEN...** I know that when some of us hear that word "heaven," we think of someplace "up in the clouds" or some kind of "divine Disneyworld" or perhaps the "Ultimate Spa." But biblically speaking, the word heaven means "the invisible place where God is fully known and His will is fully done." It's why Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*"

Some of us have this tendency to think of Jesus as being quite busy when He was on earth but picture him as sort of RETIRED now to heaven. He's like somebody who was a great CEO when he was here, but since he moved he's mostly resting or playing at some heavenly pastime or enjoying the view. That's not what the Bible teaches. At the start of the book we call the Acts of the Apostles, the book's writer (Luke), the same doctor who wrote the Gospel of Luke, says this: **In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven (Acts 1:1-2).** Luke is telling us that what we read about Jesus in the Gospels is not the END of the Jesus story; it's just the BEGINNING of all that Jesus set out to do and teach.

And this points up the SECOND reason why the Ascension is such good news. It's because it means that Jesus is now at work from the highest place of power. In human terms, Jesus did not retire; He did not even redeploy. Jesus was promoted. He was so faithful and effective in His work on earth that **God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name" (Phil 2:9).** The reason why the historic church gave as much or more attention to Ascension Day than they gave to Christmas or Easter is because they understood that the manger and the empty tomb were simply prelude to the most important reality – that NOW Jesus **...is seated AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD....** Which is to say, **He is on the throne.**

Christ is, right now, directing the continuing affairs and advancement of His kingdom everywhere. He has given disciples like you and me an important role to play in the work of that kingdom and the affairs of this planet. But He has not transferred all authority in heaven and on earth to human proxies (Mat 28:18). Jesus is LORD. He is directing it all. He is reigning in power over this creation. He has promised that, in His time and way, His Kingdom will come, His will shall be done, on earth as it is in heaven. As British scholar, N.T. Wright says: *To embrace the Ascension is to heave a sigh of relief, to give up the struggle to be God (and with it the inevitable despair at our constant failure), and to enjoy our status as creatures: image-bearing creatures, but creatures nonetheless.*²

Therefore, you and I do not need to be thrown into a tizzy by those who say the sky is falling or see conspiracies everywhere. We don't need to panic because things here are messy and conflicts are happening. Jesus told us that we would go through experiences of suffering, sin and stupidity. But Jesus has already begun the process by which evil

will be subdued (1 Cor 15:25). Our job is to be bold and courageous and faithful. His job is to be King because He IS.

I find this encouraging and hope you do too. But it's not all that the Apostles' Creed tells us that is. We're also told that Jesus ***...is seated at the right hand of God, THE FATHER ALMIGHTY...*** If you know anything about Jesus, then you know how much His relationship with His heavenly Father means to Him. During His earthly ministry Jesus was constantly talking about his "Abba," the Aramaic word for "Dad" (Luke 11:2; Mark 14:36). From the story of the Prodigal Son to the many tales He told about Kings and Masters, most of Christ's parables were aimed at helping people understand the heart of his Father in heaven. He said to his disciples: **I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father (John 16:28)**. Jesus was so excited about returning to heaven because that is where His Father was. He viewed the sweetness of that reunion as also a preparation for the eventual homecoming that you and I will have. **In my Father's house are many rooms... I am going there to prepare a place for you (John 14:2-4)**.

I don't know all of what heaven will be like, but I have this image of us getting there and Jesus comes up to us with this huge grin on His face and this utter expression of love and delight. He throws His arms around us in this welcoming embrace and we feel like we're HOME in a way that our best home in this world only hinted at. And then Jesus steps back and He says with such joy and anticipation: ***"You've got to meet my Dad!"*** This is where Jesus is now. This is the place to which Jesus ascended. Heaven is a place defined by the glorious presence of the most amazing Father, someone with whom the Son has an unimaginably intimate communion. This is the **SECOND** reason why the Ascension is such good news. It's because Jesus is now home with His Father and preparing a place for us – not so much a literal room with four walls – but a place in our heavenly Father's heart.

But there's more good news. The Ascension is also good because Jesus is now interceding with the Father for us. I am nothing close to the Heavenly Father but, with some regularity, one of my boys comes to me and intercedes on behalf of one of their friends: *"Ah, Dad, so-and-so is trying to get into this school and I was wondering, would you mind writing a recommendation for him?"* OR *"Papa, you know so-and-so. Well, she could really use some advice right now. Could you make time to see her?"* OR *"So-and-so needs a job, or an introduction, or financial gift... Dad, could you help?"* Most of the time, I know who so-and-so is and am glad to help. But because it is my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased, who is asking me to extend this grace, I am thrilled to do what I can.

Do you understand this? The Apostle Paul put it like this: **Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us (Rom 8:34)**. If you are a friend of Jesus (which is just another word for "disciple," you've got power pulling for you on high (John 15:5). The

scriptures say that Jesus is our high priest and mediator. When the Day of Judgment finally comes and Satan stands as the Accuser bring up all of our sin, Jesus will be our Advocate (Heb 7:25; 1 Jhn 2:1).

As pastor Tim Suttle observes: *"The ascension is not an optional add-on to the story, a piece that we may choose to discuss if we have any time after dealing with the more important parts. The ascension is critical. The ascension is when the King rules, the Priest represents, the Spirit comes, the People serve, and the future shines with the brilliance of God's plan. Jesus didn't just ride off into the sunset, leaving us to clean up the mess he left behind. Jesus ascended to the right hand of the father so that God's plans could be accomplished. Once we really understand that we'll agree that it truly was better for us that he go."*³

The biblical story of Ascension Day ends with those twelve disciples not yet fully getting it. **They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1:10-11)**

The story is told of a little boy who was flying his kite on a windy day. As the gusts carried the kite higher and higher, it finally disappeared from view in the clouds above. An adult came along and asked, "How do you know the kite is still attached to the string?" Without taking his eyes off the sky, the boy replied, "I can feel it pull." Ray Pritchard writes: "The same is true for us today. Christ is pulling us toward heaven... our eternal home. We may not see him with our eyes but we feel his tug in our hearts. We know where he is and we know that where he is, we will someday be. Every day Jesus tugs on our hearts, pulling us up... so that when we finally get there, we won't feel like strangers."⁴ One day the Lord will return or, before then, He'll give us one final tug and we'll end up in the place to which He has ascended."

Therefore, I invite you to join me as I close with these words from the BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER: *Almighty God, whose blessed Son our Savior Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things: Mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to his promise, he abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.*

¹ <https://canonianblack.wordpress.com/2018/02/11/clouds-mystery-and-revelation/>

² N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (Harper One, 2008), p. 114.

³ Tim Suttle, "Why the Ascension Matters," *Patheos.com*, May 17, 2012

⁴ Ray Pritchard, "He Ascended Into Heaven," *Keep Believing.com*, March 1998.