

## ASCENSION - ACTS 1:1-11

Ascension, especially for Protestants, is a hard sell. Luke begins his second volume of his two-volume "history" of the origins and spread of early Christianity with a salutation to an apparent benefactor, Theophilus, which means "God lover" in Greek. He reminds Theophilus that his "first book was about everything Jesus began to do and teach, up to the day he was lifted up." For Luke this "lifting up" is the hinge that holds his two books together. Luke's Gospel ends with Jesus' Ascension, while Acts begins with the Ascension. In the Gospel, the Ascension description is very short with no details and no commentary. *"While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven."*

Although there are New Testament references and allusions to Christ's ascension, only Acts provides a full narrative of the event. In his Gospel, Luke indicates his attempt to write "an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us." Luke's phrase "an orderly account of events" has misled many readers through the ages to think that his goal was to compose some sort of modern history of Jesus, and later, of the early church. But the phrase "fulfilled among us" is our clue that this is no history; it is an "orderly account," written by a man of faith, who has been convinced by that faith that the events he is describing are "fulfilments" of previous and ancient claims.

The church has spent far too much time and energy focusing on the

wrong things when it comes to these Lukan accounts. Luke is preaching, not reporting; he is sermonizing, not summarizing. His truth is not rooted in when or where, but in **what** it means and why it is important. There is more theological poetry in Luke than historical accuracies. And so it is with the ascension of Jesus.

If a tree is going to grow strong and tall then it must establish a strong root system. As we read Acts, we will see the roots of the newly planted church reaching deep into the soil. Jesus is the key to this whole operation. Not only is he the planter of the seed, he is the seed and the soil as well. The church is planted in the truth about who Jesus is and why he came. The disciples were called to be witnesses to the resurrection. They were commanded to take this good news to the entire world.

In order for this sapling church to accomplish the mission for which it was sent, it had to be firmly rooted in three things: Power, Proclamation, and Presence. Without the Power of the Holy Spirit they were nothing; just a sapless, lifeless stick of wood. Without the Proclamation of absolute truth that is found in the person of Jesus there is no mission at all. Only through the life-giving Presence of an authentic community in the world would the love of God and the Good News of Jesus have a vehicle through which to be delivered.

From a single seed hundreds, even thousands more seeds can be produced. Jesus planted the seed of His kingdom into the hearts of his disciples. The disciples asked Him if he was going to restore the Kingdom to Israel at this time. Everyone expects God to do something: to clothe Jesus' friends with power and to call them into action. The apostles also understand the messianic import of what lies ahead; their question to Jesus about the restoration of Israel is perfectly reasonable. The Messiah is expected to purify the land and rule over the nations. Is this finally the time?

Jesus did not answer them directly. His silence was as if he said, "Hello! Have you not been walking with me and listening to my teaching for the past three years? Yes I'm going to restore the Kingdom, but not in the way that you or all the others think. I am, through you, going to restore the Kingdom of God as it was originally designed ... for the whole world. You don't understand this yet, but when the Spirit comes into you on a permanent basis, she will help you discover that you will break the boundaries of race, language, and creed. You will be my witnesses to the entire world.

The seed looks small and unimposing in the beginning. It even lies dormant for a season. But then, given the proper environment, it bursts forth into a dynamic living organism, the roots of which are strong enough to break up a concrete foundation. This tiny sprout started with the disciples, then only 120 people, incubated for a while in Jerusalem,

and then burst out into the entire world, spreading its branches for all to see and participate.

Acts begins where Luke's Gospel left off: with grandiose expectations, all fuelled by an emerging recognition that God changed everything on the original Easter morning. Before Jesus departs to an other-worldly existence, he lays out a few additional promises. After reaffirming that his followers "will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come," he declares that God will empower them to be witnesses across the Roman world, beginning right where they are. In time they will move throughout the broader Roman province of Judea, northward into Samaria, and ultimately to points unknown, "the ends of the earth," which for Luke would have been Rome.

Jesus' promises affirm that his ascension is not the end of a story; rather, his departure initiates the next chapter in the story of God's salvation. While his words include a command (to remain in Jerusalem for the time being), their dominant thrust is descriptive, almost matter-of-fact: he tells them what God will do, and what their lives will look like as a result. No requests. No orders. No threats. No exhortations. God has impressive things in store for these people as soon as Jesus moves on.

In time the apostles and the rest of Jesus' followers will be moving outward and bearing witness to Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. But

not yet. The waiting period at the beginning of Acts is easy to skip over, as a brief narrative interlude building suspense for the eventual coming of the Holy Spirit. Yet the interval makes an important point about how God will interact with these people. Presumably the Holy Spirit could have come immediately after Jesus' ascension; but God waits. Once the disciples who witnessed the ascension had lowered their gazes and had straightened their necks, they headed for Jerusalem and the temple where the promised Holy Spirit was about to show up. In the meantime, the disciples went home, "where they were staying," and "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer."

God has Jesus' followers wait. In this waiting they begin to learn, that they are to be a responsive community, a community that waits upon God to initiate. Whether they walk back to Jerusalem from the ascension with eager energy or paralysing fear we do not know. All we know is that they have to wait. We can be sure that their prayers did not consist of biblical parsing and faulty calculations about the return of Jesus; they prayed for the coming of the spirit of God so that they could be empowered to be Jesus' witnesses in the world. The group remains sequestered, yet expectant. The waiting period conditions them to be attentive to God, so that they might respond when the time is right. They wait, not because they see it as their only option, but because they expect big things to come from God – things in which they will be privileged to play important roles.

We need not get caught up in dissecting the symbolic sights and imagery of the ascension narrative. Acts resists our questions of Where? and How? Acts insists that Jesus departs from his followers so that he might exercise his authority and influence over all things, places, and powers. The ascension does not mean the cessation of his ministry. It does not mean that Jesus is absent. It does not mean the suspension of God's activity to reclaim the world. Quite the opposite.

As the disciples watched Jesus ascend, the two messengers ask: "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring at the sky? Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. And someday, just as you saw him go, he will return!" The messengers assure the disciples (and audience) that Jesus will return in just the same way he left. When the two messengers call Jesus' cloud-gazing apostles back to their senses, they do not order them to get to work. Although there is urgency in the admonishment to stop staring slack-jawed into the sky, the moment's urgency does not result in immediate action. The first great act of the apostles occurs when they hike back to Jerusalem ... and wait.

Quite astonishingly in the 1st century, "certain women" joined them in the prayer. The world here has become quite different indeed, as both men and women devote themselves to worship of God together. The list of followers includes women and the family of Jesus. To mention "women" is unusual for a succession list. Mary, the mother of Jesus, stands as a bridge figure between the women who followed Jesus and the family of

Jesus.

Ascension is about the dangers of looking high when Jesus asks us to look low at the people he has come to redeem, to look for the poor, the outcasts, the marginalised. Contrary to some popular assumptions, the ascension does not put Jesus out of play until the end of all things. He and the kingdom he inaugurated are not on an extended break. If our images of Jesus ascending contribute to a sense of Jesus' removal from human society and our daily experiences, then we've missed the point of the ascension.

Despite Christ's departure, there is no need to speak of an "absentee Christology." Though absent as a character from the narrative of Acts after the first chapter, the influence of Jesus throughout the rest of the narrative is profound. His name occurs no less than 69 times in Acts. He guides the church in its missionary efforts; he empowers the disciples to perform miracles. The ascended and exalted Christ, though absent as a character, is nonetheless a constant presence throughout the narrative.

The ascension is not only a 'taking from,' it is a 'taking up.' It is a material event which involves the material body of Jesus; it leaves the spatiotemporal order to enter the immediate presence of the Creator. The transition from the earth to Heaven is more than a reversal of the incarnation, at which God 'came down' ... it is the elevation of man,

physical, spatiotemporal man (existing in space and time), into an order that is greater than the physical and the spatiotemporal, and which is not his native habitat.

The transition has occurred. There is a beaten path that lies before us, linking our physical existence to an existence in the presence of God. We cannot see the path – the cloud which hid Jesus on the mountain-top is a veil for that which cannot be comprehended from below – but we know that the path has been taken, and we are to take it too.

Amen.



**PRAYERS FOR MAY 21, 2023**  
**ASCENSION SUNDAY AND JERUSALEM SUNDAY**

God, our motherly Father, our brotherly Saviour, our sisterly Spirit-Friend, we ask that in our prayers and in the ordinary affairs of each day, we may exhibit your generous spirit to other people.

We pray for the Church here and everywhere; for our Bishops and leaders, for our rostered leaders and teachers, for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and for our full communion partner, the Anglican Church in Canada.

Compassionate God ... **hear our prayer.**

In particular today, we pray for the church in Jerusalem, for Archbishop Hosam Naoum, and the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and for the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. We pray for your continued blessings on the steadfast witness of the Church in Jerusalem and throughout the Middle East. and for their commitment to peace and reconciliation. Give your deep joy to those who welcome the pilgrims seeking to know this land and its people.

Compassionate God ... **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the millions of homeless people throughout the world, whom we will never meet, but whose predicament we see in news reports. Please bless those humanitarian agencies who attempt to care for them, including Canadian Lutheran World Relief, and all who give generously to support their work.

Compassionate God ... **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those caught up in war, and violence, and hatred; especially the innocent victims of these evils, those in Ukraine and Sudan, Haiti, those who put their lives at risk being desperate to cross into a new country to refuge and a chance at a new life; and those fleeing the violence of South American countries.

Compassionate God ... **hear our prayer.**

Our prayers continue for Russia and Ukraine. Today marks the first and only major pact made between the warring sides in an attempt to avert a global food crisis and potential global famine by allowing grain exports out of Ukraine ports blockaded by Russia. An agreement was extended for two months; we pray it holds for much longer.

Compassionate God ... **hear our prayer.**

We pray for northern Italy as they experience “exceptional rains” in their otherwise drought-stricken parts of the country. We pray for the people of Alberta who have had to leave their homes because of the wildfires, many out of control, and for the firefighters in British Columbia and Alberta. We pray for the inevitable and devastating loss of wildlife and land scorched by the fires. We pray that rains might come, and that the air quality would improve soon.

Compassionate God ... **hear our prayer.**

We pray for unwanted, overlooked, or destitute people in our own country, from the Atlantic, to the Arctic, to the Pacific. Please give both wisdom and a generous spirit to Federal and Provincial Governments to address the longstanding need for more social and mental health services, dental services, for more resources to ensure secure economic and food security, access to fresh water, and the numerous community services that enrich the lives of all citizens. Strengthen the outreach and missional ministry of all churches and faith organizations who provide charitable programs and services in their communities.

Compassionate God ... **hear our prayer.**

We pray for any among us here today, who, with dignity and courage, are secretly enduring misfortunes or are burdened by ongoing worries. Please give your peace and healing to them, and keep us sensitive, that we may recognise a cry for help if it comes our way and respond generously.

Compassionate God ... **hear our prayer.**

We pray for neighbours or coworkers, and for those familiar but nameless faces we notice each day on buses, elevators, banks, shopping malls or supermarkets. Please bless each according to their need, and, without any prying or self importance on our part, make us ready to help in the hour of need.

Compassionate God ... **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all the bewildered, lost souls; for young people graduating who may feel overwhelmed or anxious while sorting out their future; puzzled adults who find that neither career nor family satisfy their deepest need. Please gather the lost into your loving arms. Open their ears to hear your still small voice; and help each of us to treat awkward, prickly people with the generous respect that you have for all.

Compassionate God ... **hear our prayer.**

We pray, for those who need to feel you close, who need the assurance of your love, the encouragement of your Spirit. We pray for those who are feeling fed up, or have lost a sense of purpose or hope; those who are in discomfort, who are afraid, because they are ill in body, mind or spirit.

Compassionate God ... **hear our prayer.**

Be with us all, Lord: in all our daily struggles as we seek to follow you. Be with us all, Lord: in our periods of doubt and despair; and in our times of happiness, health and loving.

Be with us all, Lord: until that time when in your Kingdom of Love our joy will know no end.

**AMEN**