

When I was in Elementary School, Social Studies was one of my favourite subjects; I was fascinated by history then, and I still am today. What were people like? What did they do? How did they think? What did they believe?

My favourite unit in Social Studies was the one on famous explorers. I enjoyed learning about those who explored Canada—Champlain, James Cook, and Captain George Vancouver. But my greatest admiration was reserved for the earlier explorers—Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, Sir Francis Drake—they set out to explore the outer reaches of what was known.

These explorers set out from Europe with no guarantees that they would find anything, survive the journey, or ever come back; their crude instruments made navigation extremely difficult. The Atlantic Ocean was larger than they imagined—it took more than 2 months to cross.

They knew very little about the Atlantic Ocean, in fact, as they sailed it wasn't long before they were literally "*sailing off their maps*," and into the unknown. It's interesting, when you look at some of their old maps, you see land masses, oceans, as well as large sea serpents, dragons, and the like. No doubt their knowledge of these sea creatures was a mixture of real encounters with whales and sailors' tall tales fuelled by fear.

These maps didn't always provide precise geographical information, but they offered an important warning to future, would be sailors—*we have gone this far and cannot say what lies beyond, be warned, if you go further you may encounter dragons.*

As I come to the final sermon in our series through Luke's Gospel, I find myself thinking about explorers, maps, and mystery. It's clear by Luke's account that He believed Jesus to be fully God and fully man; sent by the Father to reveal, to love, to rescue humanity from sin and death. *What do you believe about Jesus?*

Sometimes people refer to faith as being "blind"—as though faith is a decision made in the dark, in the absence of information, knowledge, or experience. I would argue that faith is something entirely different—it's a decision we make in the light, in the presence of all kinds of information, knowledge, and experience.

When it comes to God, there is much that we can know because of all that He has already revealed. Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being—to see Jesus is to behold the face of God. But if you like absolute certainty and the feeling of being in control, Jesus is going to make you very uncomfortable. In this journey of faith, Jesus regularly invites us to walk off of our maps into the realm of mystery.

As we come to the end of Luke's Gospel, Jesus talks with His disciples one final time—He lays out their mission and promises to send the Holy Spirit to empower them for the task. And then, in vs. 51, Luke tells us that Jesus left them and was taken up into heaven.

And this just might be the most understated verse in the Bible—"*He left them and was taken up into heaven.*" I find myself asking, "*what do you mean 'taken up'?*" Was it a Star-Trek-like tractor beam? Did giant heavenly hands descend from heaven and scoop Him up? Did Jesus fly, or climb an invisible staircase? All Luke tells us is that

Jesus was taken up “into heaven,” but where is heaven? And what is Jesus doing now?

This morning I want to lead you in contemplating something that doesn’t get a lot of airtime but is absolutely central to Christian theology—I’m talking about the mystery of the ascension of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

Let me invite you to open your Bible/App to Luke 24:36-53; if you are using the Bible in the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 859.

*“36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” 37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. 38 He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” 40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. 41 And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate it in their presence.*

*44 He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” 45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*

*48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”*

*50 When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. 51 While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. 52 Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.”*

I’m going to structure my sermon this morning around three questions related to the ascension: (1) *What is Jesus?* (2) *Where is Jesus now?* (3) *What is Jesus doing?* Let’s begin with the first question.

**1. What is Jesus?** John 1:14 tells us that God the Son took on our flesh and blood—without ceasing to be God, He became human. Jesus was born of Mary and had a human body just like ours. He grew, He ate, He knew physical fatigue and pain—like us, He needed to sleep.

When Jesus was a preteen, His body would have undergone all of the changes we experience. Jesus would have experienced growth spurts, His voice would have cracked before it deepened, Jesus wasn’t spared from acne breaking out on His face. We know that Jesus worked with His step-father as a carpenter—under the hot Palestinian sun—He would have sweat a lot, and smelled a lot—Jesus needed to bathe as we do.

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<sup>1</sup> For more scriptural references on the ascension, read the following verses: Ephesians 1:20, 4:8-10; 1 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 1:3, 4:14-16, 9:24.

Now of course there is mystery involved—we cannot fully explain how Jesus was fully God and fully human—but the point I’m trying to make is that His God-ness didn’t take away from His human-ness; His body was just like ours.

The fact that Jesus was raised from the dead ushers us into a new realm of mystery: *exactly what kind of body did Jesus have?* This is the question the disciples must have been asking themselves. Paraphrasing Luke 24:38-39, Jesus appeared in their midst and said, “*Don’t be afraid...it’s me!*” Jesus was the one the disciples had followed, ate with, talked with, and He was standing right in front of them.

In one sense, His resurrected body was just like ours. His body was material—flesh and bones—He bore the marks of the nails, He was able to eat fish; clearly Jesus was no phantom. And yet in another sense, Jesus’ body is complete “other”—He appeared and disappeared at will, and ultimately ascended into heaven.

Resurrection hadn’t changed everything—Jesus was still Jesus, but different. Much of the Christian conversation about life after death isn’t entirely biblical—many people think of heaven as being a non-material place for disembodied creatures. The resurrection of Jesus pours a bucket of cold water on such thinking.

Jesus didn’t appear as a disembodied spirit—He was raised to a new *embodied* life. Now quoting Tom Wright, “In an act of new creation

parallel only to the original creation itself, God will make a new type of material, no longer subject to death”.<sup>2</sup> When Jesus returns—and He will return—those who have died in Christ, will experience resurrection, they will be given a new body that is no longer subject to decay or death.

Sometimes people ask, “*will we be able to recognize loved ones in the life to come?*” The only answer I can give is that the disciples were able to recognize Jesus—He was the same, but different in a way that no one can now describe. What is true of Jesus will one day be true of us—we will be the same, but different.

Let’s move on to address the ascension. Before His death, the Bible talks about Jesus as being fully God and fully human, after His resurrection, Jesus remains fully God and fully human, though with a new resurrection body. Here’s the question, *did the ascension change anything? Does Jesus still have an embodied existence?*

Maybe you’ve never really thought about what Jesus is now. Many people have a kind of vague sense that as Jesus ascended, somewhere around 30,000 feet, He shed His body, slipping back into a purely spiritual, non-material existence.<sup>3</sup> You may not be certain why it even matters but the witness of the Scriptures and the Christian Church is that Jesus remains embodied.

1 Timothy 2:5 says, “*For there **is** one God and one mediator between God and mankind, **the man Christ Jesus**”.* Paul tells us that there is

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<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Luke For Everyone*, 300.

<sup>3</sup> Gerrit Scott Dawson, *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning Of Christ’s Continuing Incarnation*, 4-5.

one Mediator, the man Christ Jesus—notice He uses the present tense, not there **was** one Mediator, but there **is**.<sup>4</sup> Jesus remains embodied. One day, when we meet Jesus face to face, it will be human hands that embrace us.<sup>5</sup> Let's move on to the second question.

**2. Where is Jesus now?** The simple answer is to say, “*Heaven*,” or, “*Jesus is now in the place where God is*.” But if we were to ask, “where is this place?” we are ushered once again into mystery.

As you may know, Richard Branson—the entrepreneur behind Virgin Records and Virgin Mobile, among other things—has launched a new wing of His company entitled *Virgin Galactic*. Quoting from the website, “Since the dawn of the space age, only 553 humans have traveled above the Earth’s atmosphere and into space... Virgin Galactic is changing that. Our purpose is to become the spaceline for Earth; democratizing access to space for the benefit of life on Earth.”<sup>6</sup>

But if you were to purchase a ticket from Virgin Galactic, break free from our atmosphere and enter into Space, you would not “find” heaven. Yes, Jesus ascended, but “no,” heaven is not necessarily “up”. Jesus ascended upwards and intuitively, metaphorically, we

understand this as the movement of transcendence. Gerritt Dawson writes, “Heaven is higher than we, not lower. It is beyond us, not beneath us.”<sup>7</sup>

Scientists now believe that our universe is multi-dimensional; there is more to the cosmos than the three dimensions we can see. Heaven, the place where God dwells, is not far off and removed—it is one of these unseen dimensions, it is very close.

Where is Jesus? He is in heaven. But when used of Jesus, the word “ascension” implies “enthronement;” the Bible tells us that Jesus is seated on the throne, at God’s right hand.<sup>8</sup> Jesus is at the Father’s right hand, the place associated with power and authority. The fact that Jesus is seated is not a statement of inactivity—it is symbolic of active rule; He is seated because there is no one to threaten His rule. Jesus is now reigning over the world He created, the world He will one day recreate and restore.

Revelation 21 tells us that when God returns for us, we will experience a life without crying, pain, or death. When Jesus ascended, He left behind the conditions of this broken world; the same will be true for us one day—no more crying, pain, or death.

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<sup>4</sup> C.f. Philippians 3:20-21; Paul tells us that our bodies will be transformed to be like His body (present tense).

<sup>5</sup> Dawson, 7.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.virgingalactic.com/human-spaceflight/>

<sup>7</sup> Dawson, 40.

<sup>8</sup> C.f. Ephesians 1:20-22; Hebrews 10:12; 1 Peter 3:22; Revelation 3:21; 22:1.

Before Jesus ascended, He promised that He would never abandon His disciples, leaving them like orphans in the world.<sup>9</sup> Jesus ascended but not before instructing His disciples (Lk 23:49) to stay in the city until they were “*clothed with power from on high*”. Acts 2:32-33 tells us that Jesus was resurrected, ascended, and after being exalted to the right hand of the Father, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon men and women. The Holy Spirit does more than empower us for mission, it is through the Spirit that we remain united to Jesus.

Let’s turn our attention to the final question.

**3. What is Jesus doing now?** We can make some sense of Jesus’ earthly ministry, but what is Jesus doing now? Did He take an early retirement? Was Jesus on the Freedom 33 track? What is Jesus doing now that He is at the Father’s right hand? Let me offer three thoughts:

**a)** First, Jesus is **preparing** a place for those who love Him—this is what He promised in John 14:2-3. “*My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*”

**b)** Second, Jesus continues to have a **prophetic** role. Whereas Jesus walked with those first disciples, and they heard His human voice, Jesus continues to speak prophetically to us by Word (Scripture) and by the Holy Spirit.

**c)** And third, Jesus continues in His **priestly** work, in fact, the book of Hebrews refers to Jesus as our great High Priest. Generally speaking, a priest’s role was to mediate between God and humanity. What makes Jesus different is that He is without beginning, without end, and without sin.

Hebrews 7:23-24 says, “*Now there have been many [other] priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.*” In vs. 26-27 we read, “*Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.*”

One part of Jesus’ priestly role is finished; atonement has been made, once for all, when Jesus offered Himself to God on the cross. But another part of His priestly role remains—even now, Jesus is interceding for you and this world.

And who better to intercede for us than Jesus, our High Priest and Brother? Hebrews 5:7 says, “*During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears...and he was heard because of his reverent submission.*” Hebrews 7:25 speaks of His ongoing work of intercession saying, “*he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*”

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<sup>9</sup> John 14:15-18; c.f. Matthew 28:20

In life, in death, and in ascended glory, Jesus remains our High Priest and Brother—bone of bone, flesh of our flesh. Because Jesus is fully human, He can faithfully represent us before God. Jesus can empathize with our weaknesses, and intercede for us in accordance with God’s pleasure, because He was tempted in every way, just as we are—yet He did not give in to sin.<sup>10 11</sup>

None of us knows how to pray as we ought; God’s ways and thoughts are often beyond us. James Torrance writes, “But as we bring our desires to God, we find that we have someone who is praying for us, with us, and in us...Jesus takes our prayers—our feeble, selfish, inarticulate prayers—he cleanses them, makes them his prayers, and in a ‘wonderful exchange’ he makes his prayers our prayers and presents us to the Father as his dear children”.<sup>12</sup>

“The God to whom we pray and with whom we commune knows what we want to pray, try to pray, but cannot pray. So God comes to us as man in Jesus Christ to stand in for us, to pray for us, teach us to pray and lead our prayers. God in grace gives us what he seeks from us—a life of prayer—in giving us Jesus Christ and the Spirit. So Christ is very God, the God to whom we pray. And he is very man, the man [high priest] who prays for us and with us.”<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps you feel trapped by your past—you can’t seem to break free

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<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 4:14-16.

<sup>11</sup> James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God Of Grace*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Torrance, 45-46.

<sup>13</sup> Torrance, 64.

from things you’ve done, or from things done to you; guilt, shame, and hurt may dog you. Perhaps you feel afflicted by your present circumstances; unsure of what to do or where to turn. Perhaps it’s the future that frightens you most—there is so much unknown, so little you can control. It makes a difference, doesn’t it, knowing that Jesus is praying for us? His perspective isn’t limited like ours, His wisdom isn’t limited like ours, His strength isn’t limited like ours.

What prayers are you praying these days? As you think about your past, present, and future, what are you asking Jesus for? What are you asking Jesus to do? And maybe more importantly, what prayers is Jesus praying for you?

**Silent Prayer:** At this time I want to ask each of you to take the next minute or two in silence—bring your desires to God, your feeble, selfish, inarticulate prayers, and invite Jesus to make His prayers yours.

*What is Jesus?* He remains fully God and fully Human. *Where is Jesus?* He is seated at the right hand of God the Father, enthroned, and ruling without rival. *What is Jesus doing?* He is preparing a place for us, He is speaking to us/the world, and He is fulfilling His role as our faithful High Priest.

Knowing who Jesus is, where Jesus is, and what Jesus is doing fills me with peace and hope. God became man, that we might be forgiven, reconciled, and restored. Praise be to God for the Lord Jesus Christ!

**The Lord's Supper:** This morning, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, I want to highlight the role Jesus played as High Priest and Mediator.

For Old Testament Israel, the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur—was the central day in their life and worship. On this day, a sacrifice for sin was offered up to God that in a sense gathered up the other 364 daily offerings. On this holy day, the High Priest offered up a special sacrifice on behalf of the entire nation—one sacrifice for many sins, one mediator between God and humanity.

Exodus 28 describes the sacred garments of the high priest. Over a linen ephod (robe), the High Priest wore a ceremonial breastplate, that contained 12 stones, one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel. In a symbolic way, when the high priest entered the Holy Place, he did so bearing the tribes of Israel over his heart. In so doing, the high priest represented the people to God, and God to the people.

In a far greater way, Jesus is our great High Priest. But Jesus didn't just slip on a ceremonially breastplate, to show God's solidarity with humanity—God the Son took on our humanity, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. He took our humanity into Himself so that He could represent us to God and God to us, not as an outsider, but as one of us.

Hebrews 10:10-14 says, "*we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. 11 Day after day*

*every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when [Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God... 14 For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."*

On the cross, bearing our humanity, our names, our sin and rebellion, Jesus offered up His life unto death—the righteous for the unrighteous, that we might be forgiven and set free. Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God would die for me!

This is the Lord's table, it contains bread which symbolizes Jesus' body that was broken for us, and it contains juice that symbolizes Jesus' blood which was poured out for our forgiveness. In nearly every culture throughout history, a shared meal is a sign of friendship, and this is the table of the Lord's friendship.

Right now, Jesus our Brother and High Priest is seated at the right hand of God, enthroned in Heaven. This same Jesus died for you, at this very moment He is interceding for you, as you come to Him today, do you really think He would turn you away? He would not; He will not.

Come to Him today with your pain and your brokenness; He shares in our humanity—He understands our struggle and weakness. Come to Him today with your disobedience, your pride, and your selfishness; He is our High Priest—He has made atonement for our sin. Come to Him today with your worship, your gratitude, and your joy—come and find new life in His generous love. Let us come to this table and feast upon the mercy of God.

At this time I'd like to invite those who are serving to come forward. In just a moment Dayna and the worship team will begin to play, and as they do, please come forward, tear off a piece of bread, dip it in the cup and eat with thanksgiving.

**Worship**

**Benediction**