

Ascension Sunday, Year C  
A Sermon Preached by Dr Trevor Kimball  
on June 1, 2025

Acts 1:1-11 / Psalm 47 / Ephesians 1:15-23 / Luke 24:44-53

May I speak, and may we all hear and learn,  
through the power of the Triune God:  
Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier.

“When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

May I speak in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning we celebrate the feast of the Ascension, and it's a bit of an odd one.

Consider some of the other major feast days. At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus. We sing of the coming of Emmanuel, or God with us. Our services highlight the cosmic significance of an everyday, ordinary occurrence - a birth - though as someone who's recently witnessed a birth, I would hardly call it ordinary.

On Easter, we celebrate the resurrection, the defeat of death, the overturning of the powers that orient us towards darkness and the inauguration of a new order where love conquers all.

And today, on Ascension, we celebrate...that Jesus is gone? It seems an odd thing to celebrate. In fact, it almost seems too convenient, designed to answer the obvious question, “Well, if Jesus came back, if he is truly resurrected, then where is he now?” Where indeed?

It is easy today to think that we live in a godless world. One need only pick up a newspaper. Death, famine, war, natural disaster. As Christians, we wonder: if had

stayed, surely he could have put everything to right. Surely he could have fixed the world.

The first followers of Jesus thought much the same. Earlier in Luke, we read that “As they were listening to this, he went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.” They were waiting for Jesus to snap his fingers and put everything to right.

So what of ascension? Jesus is gone. The disciples have been left behind. We have been left behind.

In order to understand why this is good news, let’s start with the text itself.

We heard two versions of the ascension narrative this morning—one from Luke and the other from Acts. And, as you may know, the book we call Acts, or the Acts of the Apostles, is a continuation of Luke’s gospel. That the same person wrote both Luke and Acts is one of the most uncontested ideas in biblical scholarship, and traditionally we call this author Luke. The ascension features as the end of the Gospel, which focuses on the life of Jesus, and the beginning of Acts, which tells the story of the early church.

We see this shift in emphasis, from the story of Jesus to the story of his early followers, in the two narratives. Luke’s Gospel presents the ascension in its continuity with the resurrection. The focus is on recognizing Jesus and his resurrected presence. Luke carefully points out that Jesus is no ghost—he has a body, scarred by crucifixion. He eats with his followers. In the Gospel narrative, the action is swift—in the morning, angels ask ‘Why do you seek the living among the dead?’ The women there, first witnesses to the resurrection, race back to share what they had heard, and of course they are not believed. Later that same day, two of the disciples were walking to Emmaus and Jesus revealed himself to them. Then that evening, he shares a meal with his disciples, walks a little

distance with them, and then “he withdrew from them and was carried into heaven.”

The narrative action all happens in a single day. Compare this to the beginning of Acts, where it seems as if Jesus is present after his resurrection for 40 days. We know that the number 40 features many times in Scripture as a time of preparation or transition. Moses goes up on the Mt Sinai for forty days. Israel spends 40 years wandering in the wilderness. Jesus spends 40 days fasting and being tested, grappling with his own identity. And here, Jesus spends 40 days preparing his followers for what comes next.

What is clear from both narratives, however, is that the ascension marks a critical transition.

In the ascension narrative of Acts, there are two men—angels—who ask the disciples a simple question. “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” We immediately recall that other instance in Luke’s gospel where there are two angels at the tomb asking another simple question, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

The answer is obvious—because he was just here! We buried him in this place. And dead people generally remain where you put them. So of course we’re going to look for him here.

And in this morning’s reading, Jesus just disappeared. So of course we’re going to look for him here. In fact, this comes on the heels of the disciples asking yet again, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” They are still waiting on a new political reality. Jesus’ ascension dispels this notion.

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” ask the angels. Well, where else should we look?

After hearing this, I'm sure that the disciples turned and looked towards each other, first perhaps in puzzlement, but then in slow dawning recognition. We now have each other to look at. It was their job to continue the work, to show Christ through their own faces and to meet Christ in the faces of other people.

Jesus is no longer here. He can no longer sweep in and solve problems. He cannot be neatly fit into our own domesticated ideas of what God must be like. The disciples' hope can no longer be founded on this idea of an earthly kingdom with Christ on a physical throne.

We are forced to confront that notion that God is not here like one thing among other things. God is, instead, the energy at the source of all things and beyond all things.

Recall the beginning of his ministry in Luke, when Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove. Next week at Pentecost we celebrate that this same spirit is given to us. We are not left alone.

The ascension marks the transition from Jesus' ministry to our own ministry. At Pentecost, the disciples were given the gift of breathing the same air, of drawing from the same well of divine energy, what we call the Holy Spirit, that enabled Jesus to relate to God not as a distant power but intimately, as a loving parent.

This is the real message of the ascension. The same mission of Jesus is now our mission. Like Jesus, we enter a seemingly godless world. His 1st century world was also marked by suffering and death, famine and natural disaster. But Jesus has now entered more profoundly into the very heart of reality, not as a physical presence, but as the center of all things.

The book of Acts, then, tells the story of this transition. It's the disciples slow working out of the logic of this new reality. It's the historical beginning of the idea that ALL people, regardless of their nationality or citizenship or birth or station, have incalculable worth.

And so when we confront the world, our task is not to point to some sure sign of God that can paper over the reality of pain and suffering. Instead, our task is to offer ourselves as Christ did, and to live in such a way that the divine energy at the heart of reality can show through us in our service, compassion, and love.