

ASCENSION SUNDAY

ACTS 1:1-12

BY PASTOR JIM LINCOLN ON MAY 4, 2008

Almost everyone knows the three big events in Jesus' life: His birth, His death and His resurrection. Christmas, Good Friday and Easter are almost universally recognized around the world. In fact, if you go to the pharmacy in Canby to get a Hallmark card you can find greeting cards for each of these special days. But, let me tell you what you won't find. No matter how hard you look, you won't find a card for Ascension Day. To use Rodney Dangerfield's phrase, Ascension Day gets *no respect*. Technically, it's the fortieth day after Easter and it ends the Easter season. Today is Ascension Sunday because it's the closest Sunday to the fortieth day.

WHY CELEBRATE ASCENSION DAY?

Well, marking off those forty days is very helpful because it gives you a feel for the just how long Jesus remained with the disciples after His resurrection on Easter Sunday. I want you to think about how long it has been since we celebrated Easter this year. For some of you, it's hard to remember back that far. But, that's how long Jesus stayed around, appearing to hundreds of people and giving ample evidence of his resurrection. People don't hallucinate for six weeks. It's easy to make up a story that happened in a flash claiming that people saw it through eyes of faith. It's another thing to make up a story that occurred over a six-week period with so many witnesses whose testimony could not have been easily challenged. Here's the deal for us who aren't used to the church calendar. **EASTER WASN'T A DAY!** It lasted for six weeks!

Although we don't hear much about it, the ascension is absolutely critical and here's why. What would you think if a chef prepared a gourmet meal like *Beuf Boringion*, if she chose the right herbs and spices, if she measured out precise amounts of

Burgundy, Cognac, and the rue, sautéed mushrooms, garlic and pearl onions and cooked it for hours so that all the herbs and juices could work their way into the beef medallions in the stew... and then, after all that after labor of love and skill, what if she just left it on the stove to rot? What if the meal was never served to anyone? Trust me, I've eaten Amy Gustafson's Stew. That would be an enormous waste. My mouth is watering just thinking about it. All that labor of love would have been for nothing...meaningless.

In the same way, the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus are of no use without His ascension. In Ps. 2 God says, "I have installed my king...I will make the nations his inheritance..." God the Father was satisfied by Jesus' life and work and His ascension to His right hand was the crowning outcome of his life on earth and the detonator of his rule and reign. Without the ascension, the faith is like a stick of dynamite without a detonator. The ascension detonates the power and ministry of Christ's kingdom. It's that which takes who Jesus was and did while on earth and releases that success and wonder into the universe with all of its redemptive power.

So, this morning I want us to consider three things about the ascension. I want us to consider the *hope* of the ascension, the *nature* of the ascension and the *outcome*. What hope did the ascension bring? What do we mean by the ascension? What differences does it make?

FIRST, LET'S THINK ABOUT THE HOPE OF THE ASCENSION.

When the angels address the apostles after Jesus went up to heaven what did they ask them? They asked them this, "Why are you standing here looking into heaven?"

When you read that you can feel a mild sense of rebuke. The angels asked, "Why are you [still] standing here staring aimlessly at the sky?" The apostles were stuck and needed some encouragement and help. They had interpreted Jesus' absence as a loss of intimacy, protection, leadership, companionship, friendship, and power. "He's gone. What in the world are we going to do now without Jesus?" And because they

interpreted His ascension as an enormous loss, they were sad and full of grief. What happened? Their hope took a big hit. The reason the angels asked them why they were just standing there staring, was because the doctrine of the ascension hadn't yet landed or detonated their hearts with hope. The angels were suggesting that if you're just standing here, stuck, joyless, hopeless and without a sense of mission, purpose and confidence, you've missed the point of the ascension.

Here in Acts when it describes this scene all it says is that they returned to Jerusalem. But in Luke 24:52, Luke says, "...While He was blessing them He parted from them and [they worshipped him] **they returned to Jerusalem with great joy** and they were continually in the temple **praising** God." Instead of being paralyzed with doubt, depression and grief they went back into the world with great joy and constant praise.

However, before this, the very opposite of what they imagined was about to happen. Instead of abandoning them, His presence was going to increase. Instead of losing His protection, leadership and fellowship, all of these things were going to be magnified and universalized. His ascension doesn't diminish these things; it magnifies His love, power and mercy. But it takes an act of faith in His word to get this.

You might remember that when Jesus first told His disciples in the upper room that he was returning to the Father. Their hearts were deeply troubled. But Jesus said to them that it would be better and to their advantage that he goes away. He taught them that if he didn't go away the Helper or the Holy Spirit wouldn't come. With his ascension his ministry was about to expand exponentially. Through the Holy Spirit he would convict the whole world of sin, righteousness and judgment. With Jesus on the throne, the Holy Spirit would take the ministry of Jesus into the hearts of men and women and boys and girls all over the world. It was exponentially better for them and us that Jesus ascend and be installed as King at the Father's right hand.

The fact that they were standing there frozen and numb with disappointment is understandable. However, beloved, it was utterly unnecessary. Look, when disappointment slams you to the ground, there is a great temptation to just let your

heart go numb and disengage. And sadly, so many just stop thinking. You can disengage and just stare at life. Or, you can lay hold of a deep source of great hope and joy by turning your mind and heart to the wonder and reality of the ascension. This hope doesn't sugar coat or deny the brokenness of your heart or the world. However, it can lift you up through it.

What you may need today is a new look at the hope of the ascension. Jesus is not absent; his love isn't absent; his counsel isn't absent; his power isn't absent; his mercy isn't absent; his authority isn't absent at all. Jesus promised his friends that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them to be His witnesses. Are you stuck, frozen, or numb? Are you stuck staring? Does your heart yearn for intimacy, power, love, hope, mission, a sense of yieldedness, and obedience? If so, look at the ascended Christ who has been installed as King (Ps.2) at the right hand of the Father on High. He said, "John baptized with water but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." And the Holy Spirit makes all that Jesus is and does present in our hearts. It will change the center of gravity of your life if you believe and trust Jesus for this.

SECOND, WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE ASCENSION?

What do we mean when we say that Jesus ascended? The word *ascend* can have a concrete and an abstract meaning. It can mean to physically *ascend* or to walk up the steps of a throne or a ladder. But here, that's not enough. Tim Keller says that a visitor can physically walk up and sit down on the throne of England. However, that physical act wouldn't necessarily mean that your relationship to the English people had changed at all.

So, in its fullest sense, to *ascend* to the throne of England means something more than that you physically walked up the steps. It means that your relationship to all the people of England has changed. When Jesus ascended to heaven it was a physical ascent but it was much more than that. Mere physical ascent is not sufficient.

YURI GRAGARIN

When I was eleven years old a Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, became the first human in space and the first to orbit the earth. When he returned from outer space, he made the comment, "I looked and there was no heaven and no God." He thought he had disproved the existence of God. However, God doesn't live in the heavens. In the Scriptures the "heavens" refer the sky and the outer reaches of the universe. Jesus didn't merely ascend to the outer regions of the created universe. He ascended *beyond* the created universe.

Again, Tim Keller gives this analogy. He says, God doesn't relate to us the way a man in the attic relates to the people on the first floor. God relates to us the way an author of a book relates to the people or characters he has created/authored for his book. The only way the characters in the book know anything at all about the author is *if he writes himself into the book*. Otherwise they don't have a clue. They are contingent beings and dependent on their author. They only know what the author lets them know. The author lives in a whole other realm. He created that realm and they can only know what he reveals to them.

The only reason you and I know anything at all about God is because He has written himself in the book of our history and existence. "*God became flesh and dwelt among us.*" "*Jesus humbled himself became a man and took on Himself the form of a servant.*" We would know nothing at all about God had He had not graciously disclosed Himself to us. God is holy and He stands outside of space and time. He created space and time. Physicists are now telling us there was a time when time did not exist. We are limited to time and space, but, beloved, God isn't. He is infinite and eternal.

When Jesus ascended, it doesn't mean that he went into another part of the physical universe that you could see if you just went far enough out there. When Luke tells us that Jesus was taken up into *heaven*, he doesn't merely mean the sky. It means heaven as the place of God's rule and reign. He ascended to the throne of the Father and He now has a new relationship to the universe as Lord and King. Jesus lived a perfect life in our place and fulfilled all the requirements that God requires for

everyone in His law. He died and rose again defeating death. Now, instead of staying in time and space - as we know it - and being limited to occupying one space and one point in time, he ascended beyond space and time. And now, from the throne of heaven he can take everything He is and did, as our mediator, redeemer, shepherd, leader, healer and Lord and from heaven He applies the glories of who he is and what he did everywhere. He now universalizes his presence and grace to his creation and the benefits of his being, glory and blessings can be applied anywhere at anytime to anyone who will believe in Him!

MARY MAGDALENE

Remember when Mary grabbed hold of Jesus with the death grip that said, "I lost you once and I'm never going to let you go again?" Jesus said, "*Don't hold on to me I'm going to ascend to my Father.*" The point wasn't that it was forbidden to touch his resurrected body. Others did with his blessing. By telling her not to hold on to His physical presence, he was saying to Mary, "*Mary, I know that you are afraid to let me go and ascend to the Father. But, if you let go and let me ascend you'll never be able to lose me again. If I stay, I'll be restricted to one spot and one point in time. But, if I ascend they'll never be able to take me away from you. They can take you far away, chain you up, lock you in the deepest dungeon and put bars on the doors, they can even kill the body. But If I ascend to the Father they will never be able to separate us from each other because through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, I will be closer to you than ever...closer than your very breath. If I ascend to the Father then who I am and what I've done will be detonated throughout the world. If I ascend you'll never lose me.*" So, now everything, Jesus is and has done gets detonated into the world. He's now at the throne of God, ruling, reigning and ordaining all that comes to pass for His glory and our joy and discipleship. By the ascension we mean that Jesus rules.

LASTLY THIS MORNING, "WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?"

In v. 11, the angels explain the meaning. “This same Jesus, who has been taken away from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

This same Jesus: who was the supreme **Prophet** who brought to us the words of God and words of truth that we can count on forever ... This same Jesus: who was God’s supreme **Priest** who revealed that to meet Him is to meet God. This same Jesus who is Lord and King the supreme manifestation of God on the earth, who demonstrated His sovereign authority over all created things through His miracles and who revealed His authority over all men when he put those who came to arrest him on their back sides before He let them take him to trial...this same Jesus, our Prophet, Priest, and King will come back and make all things right. And until then, because of his ascension, all that He is and does is universalized and present with us through the ministry of His Spirit. All that Jesus is and has done is now available to everyone and may be applied everywhere by anyone who will believe him.

And because the authority of His ascension is with us in the Holy Spirit, when we speak His words, and His gospel we do so with His authority. Once while George Whitfield was preaching, he noticed a man had fallen asleep. He shouted and said, *“Sir, if I was here in my name with my message and my word, you could sleep all you want. However, I am here today with God’s message, God’s word, God’s authority and God’s announcement of good news to you and this world. Therefore when I come in the name of the Lord of the universe, I demand to be heard!”* I imagine that man stayed awake for the rest of the sermon. This same Jesus who is now ascending to the right hand of God the Father almighty, who magnifies, and detonates all He is and all He has done from His throne, through his Spirit and His witnesses, will come back just as he had been taken away.

STEPHEN

In Acts 7, we have an example of a man who laid hold of the ascension with more clarity than just about anyone else. Stephen was about to be stoned to death. False charges and lies had been trumped up against him because of his faith in Jesus. But

as they looked at him his face was like that of an angel. I don't know exactly what that means but I know it means they saw something heavenly something different. They saw a demeanor that was uncharacteristic of someone on trial and about to be railroaded to execution.

He answered their charges with a long sermon in which he quoted Scripture where God said, "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool... and you have murdered The Righteous One disobeying the word...."

When they heard this they were filled with rage and gnashed their teeth. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven. He saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the Father's right hand. Stephen said to them, "*Look, (let me tell you what I see. I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.*" At this they covered their ears. Yelling at the top of their voices, they rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. And while they were stoning him, he prayed, "Lord receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Then he died.

WHAT DID THE ASCENSION MEAN FOR STEPHEN?

In the face of horrible injustice, persecution, and a cruel and horrible death, Stephen's face shown like that of an angel. His mind turned to the word of the ascension and the truth about Jesus. His heart embraced the love the risen and ascended Jesus had for him. The eyes of his faith and head saw the glory of God in Christ. Here's what he saw...He saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father's authority over all things. That reality became for him a deep wellspring and source of great joy. That reality gave him hope, peace and even compassion and mercy for those who were killing him and unjustly so.

Wouldn't you like to have just an ounce of Stephen's faith, resolve, compassion, composure, radiance and peace? What did He see? He saw the ascended Jesus standing. I think this is the only place in the Bible where Jesus was standing at the

right hand of God. He stood to receive His friend. Nothing in all the world could defeat or frustrate the love of the ascended Jesus had for his friend.

How about us? Are we easily disturbed and moved to wrath when things don't go our way? Are we easily, frozen, weigh laid with discouragement, and the sense that we are not getting a fair shake from God for all that we do for him? Do we easily get stuck standing staring in a joyless routine without and without mission? Beloved, look to Jesus.

ON EARTH, they were saying to Stephen, "You're ugly or you don't count for anything." However, Because God sees Jesus as ultimate beauty and because He sees Stephen in him, Stephen knew better. ON EARTH, they said to Stephen, "You're condemned!" But, because Jesus ascended to the right hand of God, his *advocate*, he knew better. He knew that in Christ, he was accepted and utterly acquitted before the father. ON EARTH, they said to Stephen, "You don't count for anything. You're life is of no consequence." But the ascended Jesus stood to receive his friend. Stephen counted to the One who matters most. Let me ask you this morning, "How do you feel and what do you see?"

Are you a Christian? And do you believe in the ascension? Do you understand what is going on at the throne on your behalf? If you do, it will make what people say, think, or do inconsequential to your life compared to What Jesus says and does on your behalf. They did their best to destroy Stephen. They only brought him closer to the Lord.

The gospel is that Jesus Christ came and lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died. He rose from the grave and He now sits at the Father's right hand. He has opened to us the way to all he is and does for us every day. We don't have to be frozen or stuck. Through faith in him our faces can shine to the measure of His choosing: accepted, loved, forgiven, called, sent, welcomed and befriended forever and ever. No one can love you like Jesus. So, look to the risen and ascended Lord. And see the salvation of your soul.