

“Looking Intently into the Sky”

Introduction: It must have been an incredibly strange sight! You’re one of the followers of Jesus, and over the course of the last six weeks or so you’ve been getting used to the fact that he rose from the dead, though you still can’t quite figure out how it all happened. But in any case, you’ve been enjoying his continued seminars on the kingdom of God, while anticipating, at the same time, with great curiosity, what the coming of the Holy Spirit will be all about.

And then, almost in mid-sentence, Jesus began, so it seemed, to kind of lift off from the earth and quickly disappear behind this amazing cloud formation such that, no matter how hard you looked or how much you rubbed your eyes, you couldn’t see him anymore. Luke, at the end of his gospel account, gives us the additional information that it happened while Jesus was blessing his followers (Lk. 24:51). So imagine my beginning to lift off while I was pronouncing the benediction...what, you might wonder, are you to do with that?!

The ascension, which took place 40 days after Easter and ten days prior to Pentecost (last Thursday) was certainly thought to be important enough by the early church to include it in the Apostle’s Creed, but it remains just strange enough that I think we still wonder what to do with it. However, if we recall that a blessing or benediction is not an ending but a beginning, and if we look as intently at some of the biblical texts that reference the ascension as those disciples had looked intently into the sky, we can see that the ascension was indeed a beginning. It was a beginning of what God is up to through his Son, now enthroned in the heavens, and through his Spirit, now enthroned in our hearts.

I. Where did Jesus go?

A. First, it might be helpful to reflect for a moment on the word “heaven,” and consider where Jesus went when he was taken into heaven. For, a part of our struggle in making sense of the ascension, I think, is that we tend to picture Jesus as a kind of rocket ship that has somehow taken off and landed somewhere in the vicinity of the milky way! But is that what heaven means? Is heaven someplace way out there, “above” outer space? A couple of texts bring that view back down to earth a bit.

1. Describing Jesus to the Colossian church, Paul writes: “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible...” (Col. 1:16). Thus, earth is what is visible, and heaven is what is not visible, not what is way, way up in the air.

2. Psalm 115:16 picks up this distinction: “The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to mankind.” The psalmist, in other words, identifies earth as man’s space and heaven as God’s.

3. Consider also that the presence of God is often symbolized in scripture as a cloud, sometimes called “glory cloud.” So, for instance, speaking about how the Lord led the Israelites in the wilderness, Moses recounts: “By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way . . . (Ex. 13:21). It makes the cloud that hid Jesus from the sight of his followers not necessarily a rain cloud.

B. Putting these all together, heaven becomes not some place far, far away but simply God’s dimension of reality. At the end of time, when Jesus returns, God’s dimension and our dimension will be joined into one single dimension, one new creation. In the meantime, where did Jesus go? Not off to some incredibly distant place but just “around the corner.” Jesus, I think it helpful to know, is closer to

us than we might think! But this still leaves us with the question of why he left. As we look at where we find talk of the ascension in the Bible, we can make five summary statements about what God is up to in Jesus, and in us.

## II. Why did Jesus go?

A. First, the ascension validated that Jesus' mission on earth had been accomplished. At the end of his Farewell Discourse that we looked at last week (Jn. 13-17), Jesus prays, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (Jn. 17:5). To punctuate this, on the cross Jesus declares, "It is finished." So, like a soldier returning home after the war, or an astronaut coming home after a mission, Jesus was brought home to the glorious realm of the Father after his life and death and resurrection accomplished for us the gift of forgiveness of sin and new life, revealing to us the character of God and inaugurating the kingdom of God. As the writer of Hebrews concludes: "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (He. 1:3). Mission accomplished.

B. Second, the ascension vindicated Jesus as the divine Son of God and Lord of all. During his trial, the religious leaders asked Jesus: "Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Jesus answered, "You have said so. But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." When he heard this, the high priest pulled a nutty, tearing his clothes, declaring that Jesus had uttered blasphemy, and sentencing him to death (Ma. 26:63-68). Why? Well, what Jesus did was identify himself with the messianic expectation found in Daniel 7 (our OT lesson) of the one through whom God would establish his heavenly reign on the earth. The high priest's response was not surprising as Jesus had certainly not come on any clouds, but had been born of a virgin, laid in a manger, and welcomed by shepherds and Gentiles, hardly the arrival of a heavenly king. But the ascension put him in those clouds and seated him on that throne, if you will, vindicating his claim that he would be ruler of all.

C. Third, the ascension allows for the continuation of Christ's ministry, through the church, by the gift of the Spirit. Again, from the Farewell Discourse: "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" (Jn. 16:7). The followers of Jesus were not to stay staring at the sky; they were to look out into the world, and to go out and continue the ministry he had begun, bearing witness to his goodness and love. This they would do, not under their own power but under the Spirit's power. Rather than his remaining in one place with one group of people, the ascension inaugurates the ministry of the Spirit, enabling Jesus to reside in each one of his followers as we make our way throughout the world.

D. Fourth, the ascension releases Jesus to go and prepare a place for us. Also, from his Farewell Discourse: "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you. I am going 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" (Jn. 14:2-3). I don't know how it is with your family, but when we go on long car trips, we generally do not make a hotel reservation; we just drive until we've had enough and then look for a room in which to stay. Not so when I was a kid. My mom would take no chances. She'd plan weeks in advance about how far we'd go each day, make a reservation, and then check it twice! She wanted to be certain someone had "left the light on" in a room with our name. Well may we

wonder what the new, future combined dimension of heaven and earth will look like, but the ascension allows us to be sure that Jesus has gone ahead and made a reservation there in our name.

E. Fifth, the ascension puts Jesus in a most effective place of intercession for us. As Paul explains in his letter to the Romans: “Who then is the one who condemns? No one. 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” (Ro. 8:34). We can be sure of our “reservation” because Jesus died and paid the full penalty for our sin, was raised to affirm the effectiveness of his death, and now sits at the Father’s right hand where he can go over the list with him, personally!

Conclusion: As we look around at the world today, it may not look like Jesus is seated at the Father’s right hand, in the place of power and authority over all things, and it may not look like the church is being guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. But when confused about where God may be located, or uncertain about what God is up to, the ascension invites us to trust that God is committed to our good, and to the good of the world. We have a great high priest who is working on behalf of those who wait for him (cf. Heb. 4:14; Isa. 64:4). So let us go back to the cross and soak in the unique way that God has revealed his power and authority, bringing his healing grace to us, and then extending it through us.