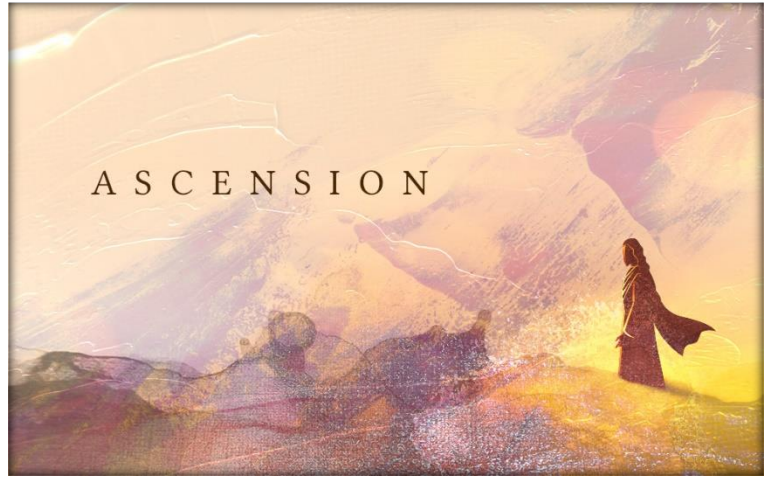


“Appeared—Ascension”

Matthew 28:16–20; Acts 1:1–11

The true story

After his resurrection, there was still work for Jesus to do before he returned to the Father. He had to lay out the mission, the vocation, for his disciples. So he told them to be his witnesses across the world, making disciples, teaching them to obey his word and baptizing them into this new family. And before Pentecost, Jesus, the King of Kings, the Lord of Creation, would be properly exalted in his Ascension.



As we strive to walk on Jesus’ path, to embrace our Lord as the Way, too often, we feel like we are walking alone or, at best, in the company of a few equally struggling friends. But the truth is that God walks with us every step of the way, in the person of the Holy Spirit. But before we race forward from Easter to Pentecost, we’d best reflect on the disciples of Jesus and their life in the weeks leading up to Pentecost.

The evening before his crucifixion, Jesus promised his closest disciples that he was not leaving them alone, for God would send another person, a Comforter, Helper, and Advocate, typically known as the Holy Spirit. But fifty days passed from the Festival of Unleavened (Bread Passover) to Pentecost, from Jesus’ resurrection to the arrival of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. What happened in those six weeks? How did the disciples make their way forward without the day-to-day presence of their Lord?

“He gave many convincing proofs” v. 3

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his followers in various places at various times. Some are recounted in the gospels, some are not. One of the earliest claims of the church was that the resurrected Jesus appeared to more than 500 of his followers (see 1 Corinthians 15). The scholar Robert Wall:

Jesus’ curriculum in preparing his followers to continue his mission concerns “the many proofs” of his resurrection and instruction about “the kingdom of God” (1:3). What must be noted first is that the Lord consecrates a period of time to prepare his followers fully for their future ministry, symbolized by the number “forty.” Their witness will be guided and empowered by the Spirit (1:8), but they are thoroughly briefed by Jesus to understand accurately what they have seen and its theological significance. The Holy Spirit does not work in an intellectual vacuum; nor is Christian witness effective if it merely testifies to the experience of God’s salvation without being able to interpret meaning for all of life. Impoverishment of theological understanding in the church diminishes the community’s influence on its surrounding culture.¹

“He spoke about the kingdom of God” v. 3

The kingdom of God is a matter of geography. It is the place where God is king. The Jews of Jesus’ day waited for the coming of this kingdom. When God reigned, there would be no war, no hunger, no hatred, no sick, no crippled, no blind . . . And the Jews had waited for a long time. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus’ very first words are a blazing proclamation (1:15):

“The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent! And believe in the Good News!”

Wow. Jesus brings the news that the wait is over, that God is doing great things, that God’s kingdom is at hand, that the Day of the Lord has come . . . that all of this is breaking in upon Israel through the ministry of Jesus himself. God’s glory had shone on them all and the world would never be the same.

Of course, this seems an odd claim to make. Evil was then and is still a present reality. There is simply too much pain and suffering in the world to suggest otherwise. So again, how could Jesus proclaim the coming of God’s kingdom? How

¹ Robert W. Wall, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 1994–2004, 10, 45.

could Paul speak of Jesus' victory on the cross (Colossians 2:15)? What do we mean when we speak of God's kingdom as present-but-coming or already/not yet?

How were Jesus' disciples to make any sense of this during those fifty days when pain and suffering and death were still part of the world, for Jesus' resurrection surely signaled the arrival of the kingdom? Richard Hays answers such questions this way:

Why do the powers of wickedness continue to operate effectively in this world? Because the story is not over. The climactic victory has been won on the Cross, but there is still much residual resistance. So we live in a tension-filled interval where skirmishes are still under way.

Alright . . . but what does it mean for us? If as Professor Hays puts it, the skirmishes are still underway, then what is our part in all this? Do we really have a role to play in the full realization of the kingdom of God? If so, what is it? Where do we start in understanding this? How about at the beginning.

In the beginning, God created everything and pronounced it good. But because the humans made a very bad choice, all of creation became distorted and damaged. I suppose that God could have waved some sort of magic wand and fixed it all . . . but God loves us too much for that. God wants to be loved by us, and that love must be freely given. God will not coerce us into loving him. After all, what sort of 'love' would that be?

Instead, God's plan to transform, renew, and restore all of creation was and is to be worked out through us. Jesus asked his disciples how they could possibly be the light to the world if they kept the light hidden from others. As selfish, prideful, and weak as we humans tend to be, God, in his wisdom, sends us out to do his work.

Thus, it is no surprise that when the resurrected Jesus met with his disciples for the last time before his return to the father, he gave them their mission: to go out and be his witnesses to the whole world, every last bit of it -- that's the intent of Acts 1:8. The world!

Making disciples

But there is more. Before Jesus returned to the Father, he left additional instructions that still shape our decisions and actions today (Matthew 28:19): make disciples of all peoples, baptize them, and teach them to obey all that Jesus taught.

Jesus taught us to care for others, to make love concrete and substantial. We are, he said, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the prisoners (Matthew 25:31-46) – in other words, we are to do all we can to enact God's kingdom here and now.

All this is what we mean by mission. It is all that takes us outside ourselves, beyond our needs and our hopes. Mission is about others – telling them in word and deed about Jesus and ensuring their basic needs are met.

Regrettably, we often chop "mission" into two concepts, and then treat them as a choice, an "or." Say the word "mission" to some Christians and they immediately think of making disciples, the so-called Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 and being Jesus' witnesses (Acts 1:8). Others, however, will take "mission" to mean feeding the hungry, providing for the poor, and so on.

We must guard against this. If we concern ourselves only with disciple-making and neglect those who lack even the basics of life, then how are we truly emulating Christ? But if we provide food and clothing, yet do not tell the person of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ, we are ignoring what matters most. We are to proclaim and to feed. We are to teach and to clothe. Both, together, constitute living the mission. As we go from Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, we go with a Bible in one hand and a pot in the other.

Hearing Jesus well

We are so used to hearing Jesus' instructions about disciple-making and witnessing, that we can be blinded to what is on the page. Jesus doesn't say, "Go and save souls," or "Go and make believers." Jesus knows that soul-saving and believer-making is God's work, not ours. But Jesus does tell his disciples to make more disciples, to carry the Good News across the globe.

It is important to remember that the word "disciple" has a specific meaning. It doesn't mean those who love Jesus. You can love Jesus and not be a disciple. Rather, a disciple of Jesus or of anyone else is learning to be like the master. More so than "student" or "learner," the word "apprentice" gets us closest to the true meaning of "disciple." Apprentices, in any vocation, are those who are consciously striving, learning, and practicing being like the master to whom they are apprenticed. This apprenticeship encompasses every part of the apprentice's being: her head, her heart, and her hands.

Certainly, disciples of Jesus love their Master and have faith in their Master, but they also share the desire to be Christlike. Making the decision to believe in Jesus, as we often put it, is not the same as deciding to emulate Jesus. Every disciple of Jesus has not only made the first decision but the second as well.

The ascension of Jesus

And so we come to the Jesus' ascension and exaltation. Sadly, the present-day Protestant church largely ignores the doctrine of the Ascension, even though it is prominent in the Apostles' Creed:

he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;

"He ascended into heaven," may seem a very simple, straightforward statement and, in a way, it is. But I think we tend to miss its meaning. In ancient cosmology, the gods are "up there" and the higher humans could get above the ground, the closer they were to the gods.² Thus, when Jesus leaves the disciples to return to God's place, he ascends skyward (see Acts 1). If Jesus was going to return to the Father, then the disciples would expect him to head off into the clouds, just as it is recounted in the book of Acts.

Of course, we know more now about the structure of the cosmos God has created. If we head skyward, we end up in outer space and, eventually, pass through other galaxies.³

Thus, this phrase in the creeds isn't a claim about Jesus heading off to a particular spot in space-time. Instead, it is a claim about Jesus' vindication (being proved right) and exaltation (being elevated in rank and power). The ascension language of the New Testament is exaltation language. Thus, the simple statement about Jesus' ascending is of a single piece with the next statement: "*Sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*"

Who's your boss? Your neighbors' boss? How about the folks an ocean away? Who is ultimately in charge of this planet we call earth? It is Jesus, regardless of whether everyone has heard of him or acknowledges that he is in charge. You might say to yourself, "Ok, but it sure seems like the inmates are running the asylum!" And at times, even most of the time, it sure does. How much must Jesus value our freedom; how essential it must be to the cosmos that God created. We are given a lot of freedom, but it is still Jesus who is Lord, who sits at the right hand of God and rules in power and might and glory.

With this phrase about God's right hand, the exaltation of Jesus is further amplified and wraps back upon the earlier affirmation that Jesus is Lord. The phrase itself is simply a very Old Testament way of speaking of God's throne room, where one is given lordship and dominion by God, as in Psalm 110:1, "The Lord says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." Jesus quotes this verse to Caiaphas at his trial, along with Daniel 7:13-14, another throne room image. It is a way of affirming that Jesus has taken his place as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Thus, when we come to these phrases of the Creed, we need to hear them as Jesus' glorification (lifting up for all to see that he is Messiah, Lord, and, indeed, God himself):

➤ crucifixion => resurrection => ascension=> seated at God's right hand

It is a glorification arc and it compels us to acknowledge that Jesus is to be worshipped as God is worshipped, and obeyed as God is obeyed.⁴ Amen. Amen.

Empowered

God's Holy Spirit dwells in all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. It is the Spirit who reshapes our hearts and minds. It is the Spirit who convicts us when we turn inward to the exclusion of others. It is the Spirit who works with us to foster an ever-growing desire in our hearts to proclaim Christ and to serve others.

The UMC Book of Discipline states:

"The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by proclaiming the good news of God's grace and by exemplifying Jesus' command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the world."

² As in the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), the pyramids, and the Babylonian ziggurats.

³ Let's set aside the curvature of space-time; it will just make our heads hurt! This is not a physics lesson. I also wonder what folks a few hundred years from now will be saying about our understanding of the cosmos. I have this feeling that we don't know as much as we think we know.

⁴ It is important to reiterate that the Apostles' Creed comes from the early centuries of Christianity, when believers were still working out even the basics of a Trinitarian understanding of God.