

Acts 1:1-11 - In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." ⁶ So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. ¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

The Ascended Christ Sends His People

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

(Revelation 1:5b-6)

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Jesus removed his visible presence from his disciples and they went away from that mount of ascension with great joy. Jesus is gone. Is this really something to be celebrating? We can more or less wrap our arms around the other major festivals of the Christian church year. Christmas – Jesus is born to be our Savior. This is cause for celebration! Easter – Jesus rose from the dead to guarantee our sins have been paid for and heaven is our home. This is cause for celebration! But Ascension sounds kind of backwards, doesn't it? On this Sunday, we celebrate the Festival of Ascension; Jesus ascended into his heavenly glory, having completed his work of salvation. When Jesus removed his visible presence from this earth, he didn't leave town like a politician, only to scoot on to the next swing state, with no promise of return. No, Jesus entered into his glory and left his people on earth with a challenge as well as a promise. Today, we see that the ascended Christ sends his people as his witnesses with his power.

The task that stood before the disciples was a big one. **“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** With those parting words, Jesus commissioned his disciples to be his witnesses to the world. A witness tells what he has seen, and these followers of Jesus had seen a great many things. They had seen Jesus perform miracles, feed thousands, walk on water, heal the sick, raise the dead, and even rise from death himself. These things were more than just quaint anecdotes from history about a man named Jesus. The message they took to the ends of the earth is the very word of God – the message that Jesus did indeed live a perfect life in place of every human being, that Jesus willingly suffered God's punishment for our sins, that Jesus did not stay dead, but lives and now reigns in heaven over all things. That is the message the ascended Christ sent with his apostles. That's the message that we have to share as Christ's witnesses.

For the apostles, their mission field began at home and expanded into ever-widening circles. The message of Christ crucified would start in their own backyard and wind up at the ends of the earth. Our mission is the same. Sometimes, when we think of the Great Commission, we think of it more like “Commission Impossible.” *Go into all the world? Preach to all creation?* How am I supposed to do that? Take Jesus' advice to his apostles. Listen again, **“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem...”** They were already in Jerusalem because Jesus had told them to wait there. The newly commissioned apostles wouldn't start their spread of the gospel in Timbuktu, but right there on Temple Mount. Jesus' command was practical. Start local. End global. When we see presentations and pictures of all the mission work our church is doing around the world, we might be led to one of two reactions: inspired or intimidated. We're either overjoyed that the gospel is reaching distant lands or we're depressed because we feel we can't participate. *I could never go to China and teach children about Jesus! I'd never be able to spend my life in India and teach hundreds of eager Christians!* If you start to feel intimidated, take Jesus' advice. Start at Jerusalem...at home.

God has planted you in a mission field of your very own; you're the one whose coworker confided in you that she's scared about what happens when she dies. You're the one whose neighbor sees you loading up the family to come to worship on Sunday while he's watering his lawn and he asks you why you bother. You're the one with that friend – you know, the one whose life seems like it's ripped right out of the most dramatic daytime soap opera, or the one who doesn't see a purpose to life, or the one who's shackled by guilt from the past. And there you are,

stitched into their lives simply by being where you are, and what a message you have to share – one that transforms guilt into freedom, despair into joy, and even death into life. The ascended Christ sends us as his witnesses. The Lord has blessed you with relationships with people who know you and trust you. And so you're the best person to bring them the message of Jesus. You're in a prime position to be a witness of the Ascended Christ. But when we hear that Christ sends us as his witnesses, our sinful nature makes its excuses almost immediately. *We've tried that before...it doesn't bring results. That type of work is for a different kind of church. What if they don't listen to me? I just wouldn't know what to say even if I had the chance...* Really?

Since we're Christ's witnesses, it will be helpful to remember what a witness does. A witness is someone who is called on to tell what he has seen, what he's heard, or to testify about a person he knows. What have you seen? What have you heard? Whom do you know? By God's grace, you know Jesus as your Savior. You know that he has paid the terrible debt of each one of our sins. You know that he gives us his forgiveness freely and only by his grace. We don't earn it, we don't deserve it. It's all God's gift. That's our testimony as witnesses of the Ascended Christ.

On this Ascension Day Christ removes his visible presence from his people on earth, but don't think for a moment that means he cares any less for you. Far from it! In fact, Jesus ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us. He removed his physical presence temporarily to prepare us to live in his glorious presence eternally. He goes so that he can be with us always, just as he promised. Jesus has finished his work of saving us from sin, but our work of being his witnesses will keep going until he comes again. The ascended Christ sends his people as his witnesses to the world, but he would never send us into such a battle unarmed. He gave us the knowledge of his word, the very sword of the Spirit. Now he sends us on our mission with his power.

Listen as Jesus promised power to his apostles, **“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** In the forty days that had elapsed between Easter and Ascension Day, Jesus had appeared to his disciples several times. With each appearance, he bolstered their faith and assured them that he had kept all of his promises. And now, as he promises his chosen apostles the gift of the Holy Spirit of power, they could be sure that Jesus would keep his word. In ten short days, these same men would receive the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost. They would speak the truth of Jesus in languages they had never known before. The Ascended Christ sent his people with the power of his Holy Spirit...but more on that next week: Pentecost.

Luke goes on to tell us, **After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.** With their eyes, the apostles followed Jesus as he went up into heaven until a cloud covered him and they saw him no more. His visible presence among his people was now a thing of the past, but what remains is his word of promise. By removing his presence from us, Jesus chooses to work through his word, not by coming and going among the disciples like he did after Easter. This is an important truth of Ascension. Our faith is not set on an earthly ruler, but on our heavenly King. Jesus is indeed our King. He did not go into heaven to get away from us pesky humans and finally get rid of us. He ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father in glory and rule over all things for the good of his Church. It's just like Paul said, **[God] raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given...And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.**

Christ the ascended King rules over all things for the good of his Church. That's the repeated refrain of the festival of Ascension, but does it always feel like it? Look at the world around you and ask yourself, does this look like it's "under control"? Watch the news for about five minutes and then answer that question. We see world hunger, poverty, war, and natural disasters. Skeptics doubt whether God even exists, let alone that Christ rules over all things. Let's take this question out of the worldwide spectrum and zoom in a little closer to home. Sometimes it happens that God's people start to ask those questions. *"If the ascended Christ sends us to be his witnesses with his power, then why do we have to bring home foreign missionaries or close congregations due to financial problems? If we have the King of the universe on our side, then how come we have such a hard time filling the pews on Sunday morning?"* We begin to doubt whether we can really trust in a Jesus that we can't see with our eyes. We wonder if he's still reigning in heaven and whether or not he'll keep his promises.

It's at those times that we need to look to our Savior, Jesus, and thank God that we have forgiveness for our sins of doubt, laziness, worry, and all other sins. Who's in control? Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who paid for our sins and now reigns forever. The One who is in control is the same One who predicted that these difficult things would come; the One who laid down his life only to take it up again; the One who ascended into heaven and promises to be with us always: Jesus Christ, our Ascended Lord. He sends us with his power; the power of his word. In that word, we hear the sweet gospel message of sins forgiven in Christ. We are assured again and again that death is defeated and that eternal life is ours. When we share that word with others, we can be sure that the Holy Spirit is doing his powerful work of bringing even more people to faith in Jesus.

After witnessing Jesus ascending into heaven, the disciples stood in amazement, gazing upward. Suddenly, two angels appeared beside them and said, **"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."** On this Ascension Day, we celebrate Christ as he enters his heavenly glory, but that's only half the story. He'll return again in glory, and when he does he'll take all believers to be with him forever in heaven. How can we know that for sure? Because Jesus has promised us. He has never lied to us and he won't start now. Our Ascended Lord isn't like a politician who skips town, never to return. He will come back to take us to be with him. And while we wait for Jesus to return in glory, we don't stand staring at the sky. We know our Savior rules all things, and so we get to look at the people next to us. Christ is risen, Christ is ascended, Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father and he fills the whole universe. But grace upon grace, he gives us a part in his grand plan to spread the gospel. He sends mere mortals to proclaim an eternal gospel. God bless us as we speak a message of freedom to the enslaved; a guarantee of forgiveness to the guilty; and a sure promise of hope to a world that desperately needs it.

Amen

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 4:7)