

“The Ascension,” Acts 1:1-11 (Second Sunday of Easter, April 8, 2018)

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, <sup>2</sup> until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

<sup>4</sup> And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” <sup>7</sup> He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” <sup>9</sup> And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup> And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, <sup>11</sup> and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

## PRAY

Today is, on the church liturgical calendar, the second Sunday of Easter. You might have noticed that on our bulletin each week we make note of what Sunday of the church year it is, and that’s in part in the hope of keeping us in tune to some degree with our brothers and sisters around the world who are in more formal, more liturgical churches.

But it’s also on there to help remind me to talk about various doctrines of the church that tend to be neglected when you don’t follow the church calendar. One of those doctrines is the ascension of Jesus Christ.

Ascension Day is always celebrated forty days after Easter, so we are still a few weeks away from it, but it’s historically one of the big holidays in the church year, and the doctrine of the ascension is one of the big doctrines in the history of the church. It’s so big that it’s in the Apostles’ Creed, right up there with the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus. When my wife and I first got married we joined College Hill Presbyterian Church, and every Sunday back then we would say the Apostle’s Creed. Many of you have been a part of churches that have done that and it wouldn’t be a bad idea if we did it at Grace. But if you know the creed you know which part I’m talking about. Talking about Jesus, the creed says, “the third day he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven.”

The ascension is a big deal – it’s right up there with Christmas and Easter. But it’s nowhere near as well understood as those holidays. Honestly until fairly recently, while I knew the ascension was a big deal because I said it every Sunday for years out at College Hill, I couldn’t have told you *why* it was so important.

So why is it a big deal? Without a strong grasp on the doctrine of the ascension, you will not understand the present ministry of Jesus Christ and how he works on behalf of his church, and you will not look forward to the very thing the Bible says you should look forward to.

We will consider three things the ascension teaches about Jesus and then take the Lord's Supper: first, it shows us where Jesus is (in heaven). Second, it shows us what Jesus is doing now (ruling and strengthening). Third, it shows us where Jesus is going (back to earth).

First, the ascension shows us where Jesus is now. Acts 1 says that Jesus meets one last time with his disciples during his earthly ministry, and then we read this beginning in verse 9: "And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he [Jesus] was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." Acts 1:9.

For a long time I read that verse and I guess I assumed that when Jesus Christ went into heaven, he reached a certain point in the sky, out of the view of the apostles, and vaporized himself and became a spirit. Because Jesus is in heaven now, and heaven is the place for spirits, or ghosts, so that must have been what happened to Jesus.

I remember precisely where and when I was when all that changed. I was in my first semester of seminary, taking systematic theology, and my professor got worked up about the doctrine of the humanity of Jesus. He said, "So many Christians think that after he died he became a spirit or a ghost. They believe he became a man, was really born into the world and grew up, but after his resurrection he stopped being a man and went back to being a spirit. But that's precisely what the New Testament says did not happen. The New Testament says Jesus went to great lengths to prove that he was not a ghost. He said in Luke 24, 'Touch my hands, touch my feet. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' Jesus Christ is right now the God-man and he will forever be the God-man."

That blew my mind. He was talking about me. I'd never considered before that Jesus Christ is still fully human. He will always be fully God and fully man. So wherever Jesus is now, he's still physical. He's not a spirit.

But then I began to wonder, "OK, if Jesus is still human, if he still has a body, then he's got to be somewhere. *Where* exactly he is?" So then I began to read Acts 1:9 as if it was saying when Jesus ascended, he lifted way up off the ground like a balloon that's been let go. One of my least favorite things when my kids were little was when they would get invited to a birthday party and their party favor was helium-filled balloons. I hated having those things in the house, because the kids would make so much racket playing with them, they'd pop them and then start crying or, worse of all, they'd want to keep the balloons in their room until they just absolutely couldn't float anymore. And to me, it was like I was having to walk into their bedrooms every night to put them to bed and looking at this floating collection of garbage, each night floating a little less higher than the night before. It drove me nuts.

So, I'd encourage the kids to "accidentally" let their balloons go after the party. I say accidentally because I know it's littering when you do this. But I'd make a big deal of the kids

letting the balloons go and watching them go up, up, up in the sky until they were tiny dots and until, ultimately, they were so high up you couldn't see them anymore.

That's how I once thought Jesus ascended – he went up, up, up, and the disciples were watching him for a half an hour until he finally disappeared from their sight. And I guess I assumed that Jesus continued ascending through the atmosphere, through the stratosphere, through outer space until he landed in heaven which must be on the other side of Jupiter or some other planet.

That's not what Acts 1 is teaching. It says Jesus was “lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” You know what that is? That's precisely the same language used in Isaiah 6 to describe the prophet Isaiah's vision of God in the throne room of heaven. In verse 1, we read that Isaiah saw the Lord “high and lifted up” and we read in verse 4 that the house where God sat on his throne was “filled with smoke,” or a cloud.

Whenever you see a cloud in the Bible, think the presence of God. You see it in Exodus 40, where the glory cloud of God fills the completed tabernacle so that Moses couldn't enter. You see the same thing when the temple 1 Kings 8 – the glory cloud filled the temple so that the priests couldn't work there. You see it on the mount of Transfiguration in the gospels, where Moses and Elijah suddenly appear with Jesus out of a cloud on the high place.

You read that and you realize that Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, was not saying that Jesus did some kind of space launch to end his ministry to go up to heaven on the other side of Jupiter. Heaven isn't a place we could travel to if we just knew where it was. It does not exist within the world as we know it, but it exists parallel to it. **Heaven is a place that occasionally breaks into our world.** Heaven broke into our world when the temple and the tabernacle were built and the cloud appeared. It broke into our world through the cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration. And when Jesus was “lifted up” and “a cloud took him out of their sight,” it broke once again into the world and opened a door so that Jesus could step into heaven and out of the disciples' sight.

Some of you may have seen the Netflix series *Stranger Things* and the premise of that television show is that in the 1980's the United States Department of Energy was doing research with children who demonstrated telekinetic powers. They wanted these children to use their abilities to spy on the Soviets. But in the process they accidentally ripped a hole between our world and another dimension called the “upside down.” And the thing about the “upside down” was that it exactly mirrored our world – for example, there would be Oxford Middle School auditorium in this world and in the “upside down.” But in our auditorium you couldn't see anyone in the “upside down” auditorium, even if it were full of people.

That's how I think of heaven relating to earth. It's not some place millions of miles away *but it's right here*. It's right here, only we can't see it or access it. And I'm not saying you have to think of heaven like this, I'm not saying the Bible definitely teaches this, but it makes the most sense to me and it make the most sense of passages like 2 Kings 6. We read there that the king of Aram wants Elisha, one of God's prophets, dead. So he sends his army to the city of Dothan to capture Elisha. And Elisha's servant becomes distraught. He cries out to Elisha wondering how they would escape. And Elisha says, “Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”<sup>17</sup> Then Elisha prayed and said, ‘O LORD, please open his eyes that he

may see.’ So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”

Where did horses and chariots of fire come from? Not from a heaven millions of miles away on the other side of the solar system but a heaven that is *right here*.

You may think, “OK, J.D., I’m not sure I agree with you or not but it is interesting. Maybe that’s how it works. But even if it is, what does it matter? What is the point of Jesus being in heaven and heaven being right here if we can’t access it?”

Second, the ascension shows us what Jesus is doing right now. In John 20, we read something that happened after Jesus’ resurrection that, at first, sounds kind of odd. Mary has come to the tomb and sees Jesus, but she’s kept from recognizing him. She thinks he’s the gardener. But we read that Jesus speaks her name, immediately Mary’s eyes are opened and she sees that it’s Jesus, so she grabs onto him. But then we read that Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father ...” John 20:17.

Now, you can understand why Mary would want to cling to Jesus. You know she’s thinking, “I lost him once – I left him with the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane a few nights ago and you see what happened. You see what good care they took of Jesus. I’m not trusting those goofballs again. I’m not letting him go this time.”

But Jesus says, “No, Mary, you don’t understand. If you will let me ascend to the Father, you’ll never lose me again. You’ll always have me. I’ll be right there. No matter where you are or what happens to you, no matter if they lock you in the deepest, darkest dungeon they can find, they won’t be able to keep us apart. I will be there with you.”

I don’t really understand how this part of the ascension works. No one does. It is a mystery. But I’m going to give it my best shot.

The glory cloud that we read about in Acts 1:9 tells us *where* Jesus is – he’s in heaven. But there’s one other phrase in verse 9 that shows us *what* Jesus is doing, and that’s the phrase “lifted up.”

Now, literally that means that before Jesus’ body disappeared, it rose off the ground some number of feet. I think that’s exactly what happened, but it’s not that Jesus needed to lift off the ground in order to go to heaven because, as I’ve already said, it’s not on the other side of Jupiter. He didn’t get any closer to heaven by getting off the ground. But by levitating off the ground Jesus demonstrated how now, after his crucifixion and resurrection, he was being “lifted up,” or “exalted” to the throne of heaven. Jesus wasn’t just ascending spatially into the sky, but he was ascending relationally to his position as the king of the universe.

There’s that place in Philippians 2 where Paul says, “Let your attitude be the same as that of Christ Jesus who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be held onto but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself and become obedient to

death, even death on the cross. Therefore God has exalted him to the highest place, giving him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

The ascension teaches us that the resurrected, physical Jesus is on his throne in heaven. All authority in heaven and on earth belongs to him, and from his throne Jesus is able to access and rule over all points in the world at all times in way that he never could have if he did not ascend, if he had remained on earth in his body. In fact, Jesus could access multiple points on the earth from heaven at the same time. It’s a mystery, we don’t understand how it works, but that’s what I think the Bible teaches.

Jesus says at the end of Matthew, “Behold I will be with you always, even unto the end of the age.” A lot of Christians spiritualize that and say, “Oh, yes, Jesus is with us in his Spirit.” And he is with us in his Spirit – the Holy Spirit dwells inside Christians and transforms us from the inside.

But I don’t think Jesus only means that. Because Jesus has ascended to his throne in heaven, and because from heaven he can break through wherever and whenever he wants into this world, it’s not only his Spirit that will be with us always – he himself is right here with us.

In Acts 9, we read of Saul’s conversion. He’s walking on the road to Damascus and suddenly light from heaven shone around him – heaven broke through to earth. A voice said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Saul answered, “Who are you, Lord?” The voice did not say, “I am the Spirit of Jesus, and you should stop persecuting him.” The voice said, “I am Jesus.”

And it brings me and it should bring you so much comfort to know that because he has ascended, Jesus himself is near me like that. He could break through at any time and talk to us like that and, while he doesn’t, he ministers to us from heaven every single day.

“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Hebrews 4:16. Do you feel weak this morning? Do you feel like you can’t go another day? Do you feel like you just want to give up because you just can’t take life anymore?

Then remember the ascension of Jesus. Please don’t think of him as being billions of miles away, loving you, wishing you well, but nowhere near you. Jesus is in heaven and heaven is right here. I know you can’t see it or feel it, but it’s here and that means there is unlimited power for Christians right at our fingertips. Just like Elisha’s horses and chariots. Vast storehouses of God’s mercy and grace in heaven right next to us, and Jesus will open those up to us. Jesus rules from his throne in heaven and will strengthen your feeble hands and weak knees with limitless supplies of grace. *All we need to do is ask!*

That’s what Jesus is doing right now – he’s ruling and he’s strengthening his people from the throne room of heaven. Third, where Jesus is going.

Acts 1:11: “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way [you could also read, “in the same body”] as you saw him go into heaven.” The ultimate goal of the Christian life is not for our souls to escape our bodies and leave the earth behind to rot while we go somewhere up in the sky and get harps, halos, and wings and float around in heaven for all eternity. That’s what a lot of people think it is, but it’s not and I could never get excited about that anyway. In fact, that sounds more like hell than heaven to me. If you ever read *The Clarion Ledger*, the state newspaper, you’ll see that Marshall Ramsey, the cartoonist for the paper, always depicts heaven that way. Every time someone noteworthy dies he’ll draw a cartoon of them going to heaven and it will look like that – wings, halos, clouds, harps. It drives me bananas.

The doctrine of the bodily ascension and the doctrine of the bodily second coming of Jesus (they go hand-in-hand, you don’t have one without the other) tell us that because Jesus has his body now, while our souls do leave our bodies when we die, it’s only for a time – it’s not permanent. Our bodies and souls will only be separated until Jesus returns. And then our souls are reunited to our bodies, but these bodies *are glorified bodies – they will not get sick, they will not slow down, they will not wear out, they cannot die.*

And on that day heaven will come down and break through completely and reunite with the earth. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” Revelation 21:1-2. We don’t escape this world to go to heaven; rather, heaven comes down to renew and transform this good world that God made, that God loves, and that God will not abandon.

This is the ultimate affirmation of the goodness of God’s creation. Too many Christians have basically lived so as to say, “So long as I’m going to heaven, the world can go to hell. What does it matter? We’re leaving all this junk behind.” But if Jesus is bringing heaven down to earth at the end of the age to live here forever, that can’t be true.

Therefore, how we live in this age matters. Our good works and our creation care all matter, not just because we’ll accrue some kind of reward in heaven, but because this world has inherent and eternal value. It is important to Jesus. Jesus loves the earth so much that he’s coming back here. When I pastored in Starkville, I got to know a lot of animal lovers because Mississippi State has the school of veterinary medicine, and vets and vet students went to my church. One time one of them asked me, “J.D., how should I reconcile my Christian beliefs with being a vet? I spend so much time working with animals, but should I if we just die and our souls go to heaven at the end of the age and leave this world behind? Shouldn’t I go in to the ministry instead? I don’t really want to but shouldn’t I if that’s how it will be?”

And I was able to share with her Psalm 96, where it says, “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; <sup>12</sup> let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy <sup>13</sup> before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth.” I told her, “If the trees are going to sing before the Lord when he comes, what do you think the horses will do? The dogs? It will be like Narnia! And the tree are going to

rejoice what do you think you're going to do?

The ascension tells us that Jesus Christ is in heaven right here and right now ruling over us and strengthening us, and that he loves the word so much he will return and restore it. Do you see why it's important to understand?

We're going to take the Lord's Supper now. I want to be clear as we pass the bread and the cup this isn't Jesus' body or blood. How could it be? It's in heaven. But we take the Lord's Supper to remember what Jesus has done for us – that on the cross, before he ascended, he allowed his body to be broken and his blood to be shed for the forgiveness of our sins. We invite all people who have personally trusted Jesus Christ to participate, regardless of what church you are a part of and regardless of how you have been baptized. And we take the Lord's Supper hoping this time will be the last. When Jesus returns to earth for his bride, we will never need to remember Jesus again this way because we will have him; we will see him face to face. PRAY.