

Why Jesus Left

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Acts 1:6-11 — So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

According to the liturgical calendar, today is Ascension Sunday, when we are invited to read and reflect on the biblical story of Jesus' ascent into Heaven. Some Christians are thoroughly convinced of and committed to a literal reading of this story. For them, the belief that Jesus physically rose up in the air and then travelled to Heaven is an absolutely necessary belief for our faith. Other Christians are much less convinced and much less committed. Even as they affirm that Jesus was both human and divine, and even as they affirm that the resurrected Christ reigns with God and reigns as God now, this image of a levitating and disappearing Jesus is just a bit too kooky for them. "Where exactly did he go?", they ask. "Doesn't this story sound a lot more like myth than history? And can't we find theological truths in this and in other gospel stories that aren't related to historical or scientific accuracy?"

I imagine that some of you here would ask those questions, and I imagine that some of you here would make a case for the theological necessity of believing in a physical ascension. And the way I see it, that's okay. The way I see it, this church is big enough to contain and to embrace all of us. To be honest, there aren't too many theological hills that your pastor is willing to die on, and the literal or metaphorical nature of the ascension story is not one of them.

So, this morning, rather than make a case one way or the other on this matter, I want to think with you about the following question: are we reading a happy story or a sad story here? Was the ascension something to celebrate or something to grieve? We might think that since it's a holy day in our liturgical calendar, it's something to be celebrated — but why? It's the story of how Jesus left us. What's happy about that? How is that good news?

I don't imagine that the disciples were happy to see it happen. No one enjoys seeing their dearest friends depart. What's more, the question that the disciples ask at the beginning of our passage — "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" — suggests that they didn't see the ascension coming. Notice that the disciples don't seem to be saying good-bye to Jesus in this passage; on the contrary, they seem to be saying that Jesus still has work to do. The

disciples expect Jesus to restore national autonomy to their people, the Jews. They want Jesus to get rid of the foreign power of Rome, so they don't have to be the little guys anymore. They want Jesus to make them fully free, so they don't have to worry constantly about their way of life being threatened.

The disciples have asked Jesus this question before: "Lord, when will you restore the kingdom to Israel?" Throughout Jesus' ministry, in fact, they have been asking it, expressing this widespread desire and expectation. Remember that in the minds of most Jews of Jesus' day, this is what it meant to be the Messiah: to liberate the Jews from whatever foreign power occupied their homeland at the time and to give them their own country back. So, whenever someone in the gospels asks Jesus "Are you the Messiah?", this role of liberator is likely on their minds.

In this morning's passage, here in Acts 1, I imagine that the disciples are thinking, "Finally!" Jesus has risen from the grave, he has conquered the Roman cross on which he was crucified, and now, at long last, we're gonna get our kingdom back! But then, all of a sudden, Jesus flies up into the sky and doesn't come down. Perhaps the disciples didn't even get to say good-bye. Don't you think they might have felt shocked, disheartened, or disturbed when the ascension happened? Sure, Jesus had already told them that he was going back to his Father and that later on he would send them his own spirit, the spirit of God, but... Did it have to happen so suddenly? And couldn't he at least have done *something* to try and free his people first?

Recall last week's sermon, when we talked about how some blessings have delayed rewards, and some blessings involve some heartache on the front end. I think that the ascension is one such blessing. In the long run, Jesus' departure from earth serves to reorient the disciples and to broaden their perspective. See, in our passage, they are focused on what Jesus can do for them, for their own people. "Are you going to give us our nation back now?", they want to know. But the mission of Jesus, the mission of God, is bigger than that. It was always bigger than that. Jesus' mission was never meant to stop with his own people. In response to the disciples' question, then, Jesus says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses not just in Judea [the central region for the Jewish people], but in Samaria [where many enemies of the Jews live], and even to the ends of the earth."

The disciples are like your kids in the back of the car, saying, "Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" And Jesus, sitting in the driver's seat, is saying, "You don't even know where we're going or how far I'm taking you." It's not about what Jesus will do for the disciples or for the Jews; it's about what Jesus will *give* them — the Holy Spirit — and about what they can then do *for God*, through that gift. Through the Spirit, which will come at Pentecost in Acts 2, God is going to be at work in new, powerful, revolutionary ways, far beyond the longstanding boundaries of ancient Jewish traditions. In our passage, just before Jesus ascends, the disciples appear to be primarily concerned with the political welfare of the people who look, talk, think and act like them. You and I can empathize with that concern. But when the Spirit comes, in the following chapter, this focus will get shaken up, their vision will be widened out, and they will be called to witness to the ongoing work of a God whose love will not be bound.

Perhaps Jesus chose to leave his disciples, because as long as they saw him in-person, they couldn't get their minds off of the Messiah and what he could do for their own people. Perhaps Jesus ascended in order to help his disciples make room in their hearts for what the Spirit was about to do at Pentecost. Jesus ascends away from his particular group of Jewish followers, so that the Spirit can descend, and be more easily received, among Jew and non-Jew alike, among all kinds of people. And that, friends, is good news.

It is also subversive news. In a world that seems addicted to exclusionary boundaries, in a world that tells us to look out only for ourselves and our own kind, the message of the ascension, paving the way for Pentecost, is a message that shakes things up. It's not about what God will do for you and yours; it's about what you will do for God when you are empowered by the Spirit, who descends upon people of every tribe and tongue and tradition, as we will celebrate next Sunday. This week, friends, let us be prayerfully attentive to the Spirit's work outside of our tribe, our tongue, and our tradition. Let us be open to following the Spirit outside of our usual boundaries. Amen.