

“Taken Up”

Introduction: How do you do when going through a transition in your life? Whether it’s transitioning from high school or college to the workplace, or from one job to another, or from one pastor to another, or (on this Mother’s Day) from entering the hospital with a baby in your womb and leaving with that baby now in your arms, transitions are often not easy!

The disciples of Jesus were facing a rather large transition following his ascension into the realm of heaven, an event that took place forty days after Jesus’ resurrection and ten days before Pentecost (last Thursday). As Luke describes it at the end of his gospel, one minute Jesus was blessing his disciples and the next he was gone! It would be kind of like, as I imagine it, my speaking the benediction to you and then somehow vanishing from your sight as I did so. How difficult that must have been for the disciples! What questions it must have raised! They were just getting used to his being around again. And, here was the fellow who, for three years, had been teaching his followers that the key to life lay in his invitation, “follow me.” But, how were they supposed to follow this?! The best they could do, as we’ll hear Luke describe it, is stand and stare blankly at the sky!

And yet, as Jesus had taught them about what lay ahead, he did say, “It is for your good that I am going away” (Jn. 16:7). So, let’s hear our texts for today as we reflect on this event called ascension, and then we’ll consider where Jesus went and why it was good that he did so. [READ]

I. Where did Jesus go?

A. Of all the events in the life of Jesus, his ascension is probably the most likely to be skipped or skirted over. It seems far easier to refer to Jesus as our crucified and risen Lord, and somehow more difficult to refer to him as our crucified, risen, and ascended Lord. That last adjective seems to have a harder time making an appearance! But, though Luke is the only gospel writer to describe it, the significance of the ascension is testified to throughout the NT. Moreover, it is also included in the Apostles’ Creed in order to direct us to acknowledge it as an important event, both in the experience of Jesus as well as in our life of faith.

B. Part of our struggle probably comes from a tendency to picture Jesus as a kind of rocket ship that has taken off and landed somewhere in the vicinity of the Milky Way! What good does that do us?! But is that what heaven means, someplace way up high and way out there? A couple of texts may help bring that way out view of heaven down to earth a bit.

1. Psalm 115:16, for instance: “The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to mankind.” Earth, in other words, is man’s space while heaven is God’s space. Realm, not distance, is the issue.

2. In Col. 1:16 Paul seems to be making a similar distinction for the church in Colossae: “For by him [Jesus] all things were created: things in heaven and earth, visible and invisible . . .” Earth is what is visible while heaven is what is not visible.

3. Then there’s the way Jesus instructs his followers to pray: “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Ma. 6:10). Heaven is where God’s will is done and it is possible for heaven to break into earth (which is in fact how God’s new creation is described in Revelation 21).

4. And then consider that the presence of God in the OT is often symbolized as a cloud, not a rain cloud but a “glory cloud” as it’s called. So, for instance, God leading his people Israel is described in Exodus 13:21 in this way: “By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way” (Ex. 13:21). And when the tabernacle is finally set up, we read that the glory, or presence, of the LORD filled it like a cloud (Ex. 40:34f).

Putting this all together, heaven can be understood as not some place far, far away and irrelevant to our life here on earth. Heaven is better understood as God’s dimension of reality that is actually nearer to us than we think. The words “up” and “down” are used to acknowledge the distinction, not the distance, between God’s realm and our realm. And so Jesus, on that day of ascension, didn’t rocket out of sight but was more likely simply enfolded in a cloud-like dimension that hid him from view.

But if that helps us a bit with where Jesus went, it still begs the question: Why did he go? The NT makes several statements in this regard. We can think about them under the headings validation, vindication, and vocation.

II. Why did Jesus go?

A. **Validation.** The ascension validated Jesus’ mission on earth. What Jesus set out to accomplish he accomplished. I remember times when I was a kid and wanted to go outside and play with my friends. “Have you finished your homework?” my mother would ask? Even when I said “yes,” she would come and take a look, validating my claim and making sure I had indeed finished and not missed anything.

As his time on earth was drawing to a close, John records Jesus as praying: “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. 17:4-5). And then on the cross we hear Jesus declare, moments before he died: “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30). The mission to identify with us as human beings, to show us how to live, to cleanse us from our sin, and to defeat evil and death, had been accomplished. But Jesus wasn’t going to ascend on his own authority; he sought the validation of his Father who “took Jesus up,” and seated him at his right hand (Eph. 1:20-22; Heb. 12:2). The ascension was the Father’s way of validating his mission. Nothing was missing. Jesus did what he’d been called to do.

Therefore, one of the truths that flows out of the ascension is that we, for whom his mission was undertaken, can rest confidently in the completeness and effectiveness of his work on our behalf.

B. **Vindication.** The ascension vindicated Jesus’ claim that he is Lord of all. You may recall that during the trial of Jesus there was great question and confusion as to who Jesus was: “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God,” the high priest demanded. “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. Then he continued, “I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” To which the high priest pulled a nutty, charged Jesus with blasphemy, and sentenced him to death. What upset him so? What Jesus did was identify himself with the divine son of man figure we heard about in the prophecy of Daniel 7. Jesus was declaring that he would fulfill this prophecy and be ruler over all things.

Paul affirms this role as he describes the implication of the ascension to the Ephesians:

... [the glorious Father] 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 name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything... (Eph. 1:20-22).

Talk about a job description...but thank God for it...we need not fear! For, the ascension reveals that Jesus is not only still at work, maintaining and sustaining all that he has made, but it affirms that no matter how nutty things get in our world, Jesus is firmly and solidly in control as Lord of all. Further, from this position of authority, as the two men in white reveal, and the Apostles' Creed reminds, Jesus will return one day and bring justice to bear on earth while holding all accountable for their actions.

C. Vocation. The ascension sets the stage for the heavenly ministry of Jesus to begin, a ministry that we see, broadly speaking, has three parts.

1. Intercession. Paul explains: "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). The one who experienced our life now has the close ear of the Father, on our behalf. Through the earthly ministry of Jesus we come to know God. Through this heavenly ministry of Jesus, God comes to know us. How privileged we are!

2. Preparation. As Jesus put it to his first followers: "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). Like my mother, who, on our long family car trips, would always surround herself with AAA guides so that we could be sure to have a motel room reserved for the coming evening, Jesus has reserved a place for us and has probably "left the light on" so that we don't have to worry if a room will be waiting.

3. Direction. As we will pick up next week on Pentecost, the ascension allows for the continuation of Jesus' ministry on earth, through the church, led by the gift of the Spirit, who resides intimately and personally with each of us. This is why Jesus said, "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 up at the sky; they were to look out into the world and head out into that world, empowered and directed by his Spirit, to bear witness to his goodness and love. Rather than remaining in one place with one group of people, the ascension inaugurates the ministry of the Spirit, enabling Jesus to reside in each of his followers as we make our way through the world and continue his ministry to it.

As we reflect on this event called ascension, may it open our hearts to consider:

- Jesus is nearer to us than we may think;
- His mission on our behalf was effectively completed;
- He is Lord of all;
- He is interceding for us;
- He is preparing a place for us;
- He is empowering and directing us to accomplish his purposes.

So let us rejoice that he is King, and that his kingdom cannot fail, as we sing #165....