

Coming Back

Acts 1:9-14

(Reimagining Church; Message Four)

⁹After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. ¹⁰They 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.”

¹²Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city. ¹³When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (Acts 1:9-14)

Message:

We’ve been studying the book of Acts and the early church and re-imagining what the Church might look like today if we embrace God’s preferred future...

Luke, the author, begins his book by underscoring Jesus’ **Resurrection** (1:1-4). Luke writes: “After his [Jesus’] suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs he was alive and appeared to them over a period of forty days.”

Many saw Jesus alive after his death with their own eyes; many multiple times. Many heard him speak and continue to teach about the Kingdom of God. Many saw him eat (ghosts don’t eat). Luke wants to make sure we all understand, Jesus is not dead but alive!

The resurrection story is the bedrock on which **Christianity** and the **Church** are built. The apostle Paul knew this. He said, “If you want to destroy our faith. This is where you start. Disprove this one fact. Question the resurrection.” (1 Corinthians 15:17 - “If Christ has not been raised, [our] faith is futile.”) People have been trying for 2000 years; no one has yet successfully succeeded.

This is the gospel: A dead man got up and walked! Jesus’ resurrection is the hope of our resurrection; his resurrection is the guarantee of our eternal life.

Inherent in this Good News (Gospel) is the call to **evangelism**: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-26).

Luke says the Father will be sending the **Holy Spirit**, and with the Holy Spirit will come the power to witness and evangelize the Gospel. Last week we said Acts 1:6-8 is the **thesis** statement and **outline** for the book of Acts and the building of Christ’s church.

Luke writes that this Holy Spirit will **empower** followers of Jesus so they can witness of him “*in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*”

JESUS GOES BACK HOME

Luke now continues with a recounting of Jesus Ascension (1:9-11). Christ’s ascension must have been an **amazing** event and experience for Jesus’ disciples; but the Scriptural account is rather terse: “*He was taken up*” (1:9)

The ascension doesn't seem to receive the same type of biblical news coverage Christ’s birth, or his miracles, death and resurrection received. Maybe that’s why it’s not on most believers’ radar and most churches ignore it. But we ought not minimize it merely because the biblical coverage is understated.

Imagine you’re standing on this mountain of olive trees talking with your teacher. One moment you’re listening to Jesus talk about his Kingdom coming: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, so, while going [about your life], make disciples of all nations...*” (Matthew 28:19f) and then he is slowly *taken up* [raised] while you watch! No platform; no cables; no ropes. Incredible!

In the Apostle’s Creed we confess, “*he ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God.*” In the Heidelberg Catechism, we acknowledge “*he [now] pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of his Father*” (Q/A 49). We believe “*he is the head of the church, and the Father rules all things through him*” (Q/A 50). We say, “*through his Holy Spirit he pours out his gifts from heaven.*” (Q/A51)

Forty-days after celebrating his resurrection, the disciples again have to say *goodbye*.

Jesus had already forewarned them about this: “*It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away the counselor will not come to you, but if I go I will send him to you.*” (John 16:7) (It doesn't appear they really understood).

It is always difficult to say good-bye; but this time is quite different; Jesus parts in triumph.

What’s the big deal about the Ascension? We know the importance of the incarnation, the virgin birth, the atonement, Christ’s death on a cross, and the resurrection. We celebrate Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost; but why his Ascension? Answer:

The Ascension of Jesus underscores the **credibility** of Christ. Jesus said he came from the Father and would return to the Father. Jesus is simply returning home - just as he said he would.

The Ascension of Jesus underscores the **completion** of his work on earth. Jesus had accomplished everything his Father asked, fulfilled every prophecy, and prepared the way for us to come to the Father. Our forgiveness, our new life, and our eternity were is possible.

The Ascension of Jesus opens the door for the **comforter** to come to empower us to do the Father’s will; Jesus said, if he didn't go, the Holy Spirit couldn’t come.

The Ascension of Jesus means he is now at the Father's side pleading our **cause**; exercising his authority over the world, interceding with the Father on our behalf.

The Ascension of Jesus means we can **celebrate** because Jesus reigns as our Savior and Lord, as the head of His church. He is preparing a place for us...

JESUS WILL COME BACK

Two white-robed angels arrive to engage the disciples while they're staring at the clouds Jesus disappeared into (Imagine Jesus ascending and seeing angels in one day!)

They provide a word of **encouragement**: "*Men of Galilee why do you keep gazing into heaven? Snap out of it! He's not coming back right now; so let's get on with it. There is a whole world out there to win for Jesus! You have your marching orders.*" (Translation: Jesus didn't tell you to just stand staring into the sky waiting for his return; Translation: Even though he is gone, you have your marching orders; he has already told you who you are and what you're to do; Translation: "Get going; be his witnesses! There is no time to waste! Go now!")

Then comes a word of **promise**: "*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.*"

People often tend to handle life by living in nostalgia - i.e., focused on the past: "we've always done it this way;" "roll the clock back;" "push the rewind button again..."

- Remember when Jesus turned water into wine...that was crazy; everyone thought the host had saved the best wine for last...
- Remember the look on the Pharisees faces when Lazarus walked out the tomb; did he ever smell; but the leaders didn't know what to say.
- Remember that time we were fishing. I'll never forget all those fish we caught that one morning after we'd been fishing all night and caught nothing!
- Remember what an awful day that Friday was; and how unbelievable it was when he just popped in that Sunday afternoon.

The disciples wanted Jesus back. Maintain the status quo. Push the rewind button.

Nostalgia comes from the Latin word "nostros" which means **home** (*Nostalgia* is literally the "search for home;" our lives are an ongoing search for "home"). We have a home; but you won't find it in the **past**; you only find it by looking to **Jesus**; he is our present (and our future) home.

The angelic advice is a reminder to put the past behind us, to look ahead, and to get on with his mission; don't forget to keep the main thing the main thing! It is a reminder that the best is not behind you; the best is yet to come! There is work to be done - you can't just stand around. Nostalgia can be a wonderful servant but it makes a horrible master.

So **be ready** (get going); witness Jesus; because Christ's return is **certain** and he's coming back to see how we did.

THE DISCIPLES COME BACK TO JERUSALEM

The disciples obey Jesus and follow the angels' directions... They return back to **Jerusalem**; they retreat to wait in the upper room (as Jesus had told them).

There is, if you will, only one "star" in this drama; His name is Jesus Christ. His co-star is the Holy Spirit. And there is a large cast of supporting characters - some will play major roles, other parts seem less significant. But all the roles are necessary, important and indispensable; all deserve recognition.

Luke mentions those who came back to Jerusalem here in Acts 1:13-14:

First, the **apostles** - these extra-ordinary people are actually very ordinary, very much like you and me.

- Philip who was worried about the money at the feeding of the 5000
- James and John who had demanded the best seats in Jesus Kingdom
- Peter who betrayed Jesus three times
- Thomas who demanded to see Jesus nail prints before believing
- Only Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus, was missing

There were the **women** - Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Cuza, Susanna and many others (**cf. Luke 8:2**) - they had quietly followed Jesus everywhere.

Finally, Luke mentions Jesus' **mother**, Mary, and his **brothers**. This is important! Not long ago, they thought Jesus was crazy (**Mark 3:21**) and should be put away.

Tradition suggests Jesus' brothers - James (author of James), Joseph, Simon and Judas (author of Jude) (**Matthew 13:55**) - didn't believe he was who he said he was until after his resurrection - the bedrock of our faith - but they're here now!

I love that Luke notes Jesus's mother is here as a fellow believer/witness. Tradition suggests Mary lived to about 60 years of age; that's about fifteen years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. History tells us Mary moved with the Apostle **John** (remember Jesus made his mother John's responsibility) to **Ephesus** where John pastored the church.

History records that Ephesus and most of **Asia Minor** became followers of Jesus by witnesses empowered by the Holy Spirit... (I'm convinced Mary played a role in that - as well as Jesus' brothers). Mothers love to tell the stories of their children - and Mary had a story to tell by which all other stories pale...

Mary was given a gift - a glimpse of the full identity, **power** and **impact** of her Son. It is one of the stories Luke records in Acts of the triumph of **hope** over **hardship**.

THE DISCIPLES COME BACK TO PRAYER

Some have observed that the real miracle of Pentecost was not the wind or tongues of fire or the coming of the Spirit, but that the disciples were together in **one accord**. This bunch of misfits that frequently quarreled among themselves were now together in harmony, supporting one another, praying side-by side for the same thing...

One way to underscore the power of the Holy Spirit is to see a Zealot and a tax collector, a bunch of competitive fishermen, a Judean and a bunch of Galileans all getting along. When its members are living together in **one accord**, their witness is powerful and its impact on the world - transforming.

Being in one accord doesn't mean we deny or distinguish our uniqueness, our differences, or our disagreements; unity doesn't require uniformity. The issue is not about having differences, the issue is how we handle those differences; in the Church, they can't divide or separate us. The Church needs to be defined and marked by love, grace, forgiveness. When the Spirit floods over us, the fences are covered.

The only way that is possible is by **praying together** - so the early church gave themselves to prayer (I sound like a broken record; but our unity in Christ is that indispensable).

Their waiting wasn't passive; they were actively engaged in prayer. Prayer is a foundational and essential part of the life of God's people. Prayer is an essential part of the strategy God uses to change his world. So deprived of the physical presence of Jesus they sought his presence through prayer; while they waited...they anticipated (Back to week 2).

They prayed with expectation; God heard their prayers; God sent his Spirit. Fact is, most of the time we worship and witness, we really don't expect anything to happen; so it never surprises when nothing does (Just when something happens).

Since we don't expect anything to happen, eventually we stop engaging in worship or witness; maybe we still go through the motions, maybe not. A few months ago, we engaged in a discernment process; we asked "What is God's will regarding the parsonage?" We prayed. We listened for God in each other. We expected God to give us an answer. He did.

We asked God to give us ears to hear Him; the fortitude to set our personal opinion and agenda aside; the grace to embrace those we might disagree with. That's praying, discerning, anticipating, obeying together - in one accord.

The quickest way to grieve God and detract from our witness in this world is to demand our own way - to promote our agenda over His; that is, to set aside prayer, to become prayerless.

I find it interesting that the early Church seldom talks about **Church.**

We love to talk about our church - ideally we always talk positively about it; but the reality is, we also do a lot of complaining about it (It is, in my estimation a primary reason many/most churches aren't growing. With all the infighting going on in Churches today, why would anyone want to join?)

The interesting thing is early church members seldom talked about their church, instead they **talked about Jesus**. About whom he was, about what he has said and done, about his crucifixion and resurrection; about his healings and miracles, about his love and his grace. They understood the main thing.

Some time ago Time magazine had a cover story on the two dozen "most influential Christian Leaders" in our country; in their interviews, they all talked extensively about their church; only one even mentioned Jesus!

All the elements necessary to turn the church **right-side up** are right here in this text: A **risen Savior** and **Lord** who is still alive today! An **empowering Spirit** that loves to take up residence in Christ-followers, and the disciples of Jesus on their **knees** in **prayer** - in one accord.

Nancy Spittleburg (and Dorothy Pert) wonder in "If only I had known"

Lord, I crawled across the barrenness to you...with my empty cup...

Uncertain in asking any small drop of refreshment

If only I had known you better; I'd have come running with a bucket

Why do we as believers live like beggars with tin cups; Why when we come together do we seem to leave our buckets behind: "Lord, fill my **bucket...make it overflow."**

When Jesus returns; when he comes back as he promised, he expects to find our buckets full.