

ESF Lord's day service message

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The Resurrection, and then What?

Luke 24:50-53

Acts 1:9-11

Do you know the difference between a short cut, and a scenic route? I recall my first few drives from Baltimore to Chicago, and back: I always took Route 70, which is long, slow, scenic. Later, to save time and miles, I drove Route 80, the main Interstate heading east and west. Then, I learned to save more time taking the Chicago Skyway. Now, many years later, after making the trip countless times, I forget what the longer scenic routes look like. I see signs saying "Scenic Route", and wonder: what am I missing?

Many Christians take an unfortunate shortcut in our Bible reading: when we get to the resurrection part of God's story, on Easter, we ponder the scene, and then jump ahead to the future return of Jesus, and our hoped for time of rest in heaven. What do we miss? The ascension of Jesus!

Philip Yancey writes: "If Easter Sunday was the most exciting day of the disciples' lives, for Jesus it was probably the day of Ascension. He the Creator, who had descended so far and given up so much, was now heading home. Like a soldier returning across the ocean from a long and bloody war. Like an astronaut shedding his spacesuit to gulp in the familiar atmosphere of earth. Home at last."

Let us look at the ascension, and see what we've been missing. We will answer two questions: what is the ascension? And, what does the ascension mean for us?

A. *What is the ascension (or: what happened, and where)?*

1. *See Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:9-11*

Luke 24:50-53

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Acts 1:9-11

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.”

2. The ascension happened at a real place, before real witnesses. Jesus’ feet were standing on a real spot of ground, and then...they were not (he went up; he was hidden by a cloud; he will come back in the same way: all of these facts tell us that the ascension is not a myth, an idea, or a dream. It's real). Jesus had spent 40 days interacting with many followers after Easter, and then, he departed.

B. *What does the ascension mean for us today?*

1. When Jesus ascended, He went to a real place. The Bible calls this place Heaven or Paradise. It is not just a state of mind, wishful thinking, a vain or vague hope, or a wistful dream. We do not know exactly where Heaven is, but we do know that it is a real place—in fact, even more real than the world we currently inhabit.

Hebrews call our eternal hope an anchor of the soul. In John’s Gospel Jesus tells us that one specific reason for his ascending (going away) is to prepare a place for us in his Father’s house. It makes all the difference in the world that the Jesus we know and follow is also the

ascended and exalted Lord in heaven.

The documentary *Seoul Train* is about people who risk everything to help North Koreans escape that land of tyranny and oppression and find freedom. To gain freedom, North Koreans must first go to China. Once in China, are they free? In many ways, yes; but, in the most important way, no! If caught in China, they are sent back to North Korea. What gives hope to those still trapped in North Korea is the good news: your loved one has arrived safely in a free land...USA, Canada, etc.

The Lord Jesus is in the most free land of all, and he has promised to return for us and bring us to where he is. Is this your anchor of hope today? Hebrews 6:19-20.¹⁹ *We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain,*²⁰ *where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.*

2. When Jesus ascended, He began his journey toward the completion of His goal and his ultimate glorification and exaltation. His time of humiliation on earth ended and He returned to the glory He shared with His Heavenly Father before He came. This is how we know Jesus really is Lord, King, and Ruler of the universe. The Bible in many places describes it as his being seated at the right hand of God. This is an image of settled and permanent victory, dominion, and Lordship.

Have you ever played the childhood game King Of The Hill? A group of young people find a hill (the higher, the better), and the goal is simple: whoever makes it to the top of the hill, and stands his ground without being pulled or pushed back down, wins! Jesus is The Cosmic King Of The Hill. All his enemies, whether the devil, or other evil spiritual forces, or people who refuse to worship him, and all his enemies throughout all time, in all places, will never succeed in bringing him down. He is Lord of all! He is Victor forever.

If you are in Christ, victory is yours. The last word regarding your life will be: Victory! Do you believe this today? Hebrews 9:11-12.

3. Jesus' ascension brought great sorrow at first to the apostles—but this shows how we can trust God even with the unknowns of life. The apostles had no idea that Jesus' leaving them physically meant that He would send the Holy Spirit to dwell within them—that they would have even more intimacy with Jesus now that He was absent physically.

Think of how Jesus told Mary to stop clinging to him. Why? And, why did he strangely talk about his departure with joy? In every other relationship in life, separation, goodbyes, departures, distance, lack of physical closeness are considered occasions for grief, sadness, tears. But Jesus' ascension reverses all of this.

This fact teaches us that God is a God of reversals: appearances don't tell the whole story, surprises await the heart that lives by faith, dark storms bear Jesus' people along in shrouds of mist and fog that will quickly, by Jesus' power, be dispersed to reveal the perfect light of calm and joy. Whatever sadness or grief is weighing on your heart this morning...God knows, God sees, and God will comfort you in the intimate presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus ascended, and put off the limitations of time and place that he had submitted himself to while here on earth.

Now, in the person of the Holy Spirit, our communion with the Lord is not subject to temporal or logistical limits. Jesus is here right now, with you. He is an ever-present, never failing, wise and powerful Lord. Do you believe this, and are you living out the implications of this truth?

4. Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God the Father, where He intercedes for His people. There, He reigns victorious, and all that follow Him will be victorious too. He has all authority, and is in complete control.

What circumstances in your life have got you down today? Are there people at work that treat you poorly? Are you tired of physical pain and weakness? Are you weary of the lies and deceitful schemes of powerful people in your life? Has someone abused you, or used you for personal gain? Do you feel broken and empty?

Come to Jesus. He is in control, he sees, he knows, he cares. Jesus can do all that is needed to bring about the absolute best for you, in His time, in His way. Therefore, you can rest, assured that the all wise, all powerful, perfectly good, righteous and holy Lord will cause you to rise and shine in His good time.

Rest today, and cast your cares upon Jesus.

See Hebrews 4:14-16. ¹⁴ *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* ¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.* ¹⁶ *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

5. Jesus' ascension foreshadows his return and therefore inspires us to get busy serving Him and hoping for his return, rather than staring into the sky, as the apostles did at first. In other words, the ascension means that Christians live lives of purpose, hope and ultimate victory because we worship the Savior who is our hope, our purpose, and has purchased our ultimate victory. What is your mission in life? What is your calling? If you belong to Jesus, than Jesus' ascension means that the Holy Spirit has entered into your very being, and granted you

spiritual gifts for the purpose of serving and glorifying God. Get busy using your gifts right now, right where God has placed you.

Years ago, the grocery store Trader Joe's used to give free helium filled balloons to customers. Our children always wanted balloons, for one reason: as soon as we left the store, we would let go of the balloon string, and watch it float into the sky. We would gaze into the sky watching the balloon as long as possible, until it looked like a small dot in the clouds. Two questions we would ponder: how far did it fly, and where would it land? One thing we knew for sure: we would never see the balloon again. It was gone for good.

Unlike those balloons rising in the sky, Jesus is not gone. He's just away for a time. Unlike that balloon, we know where Jesus is, and we know we will see him again. So, the angel's message is for you today: why are you standing, looking into the sky, and worrying? Get busy serving the Lord who died, rose again, ascended, and is exalted for you. He is Lord of heaven and earth, and He is worthy.

In running races, there is the rabbit. The rabbit is a designated pace-setter, a runner trained and prepared to run at the maximally fast pace out in front, to pull the competing runners along. In other words, the rabbit is the visual motivator for the competing runners. But a rabbit always drops out and steps off the race course before the finish line. Hebrews tells us Jesus is our forerunner (our rabbit); but, Jesus stays the course and finishes for us.

Conclusion: Hebrews 12:1-3! *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*