

Ascension

Text: Acts 1:1 - 11 (NIV)

¹In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ²until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” ⁶So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” 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.”



Theme: Everything Has Changed for the Better

Change isn't something that many of us like. It is often that way with regard to translations of our favorite hymns and Bible verses. When we got a new hymnal, some of you might have noticed changes to your favorite hymns. It probably wasn't something that you liked. I often have trouble with the new Bible translation that we use in the Bible readings and wish that the new hymnal had stayed with the NIV. Some of you might say that your favorite translation is the King James, New King James, RSV or another version.

We sometimes don't like to change with our fashion. It took me a long time to stop wearing those long tube socks with the wide stripes on top when I wore shorts. I still don't like the shorts that go down to your knees. They remind me of the Bermuda shorts that my dad used to wear.

Change is often unpleasant, but it is often good. There are often a lot of tears when your children leave the house, but would you really want them back now? It is a big change when we get married, but it is one of God's greatest blessings. When that first child comes, life is never the same. Life changes with each child, but what a blessing each of them is. Job changes are often hard, but they can also be very positive.

Today we see that the disciples didn't like it that Jesus was going to leave them. They wanted things to stay the same, but because our Lord's ascension into heaven has changed everything for the better.

- I. Throughout the resurrection stories, Jesus' followers longed for things to go back the way that they were before His passion.

When Jesus revealed Himself to Mary Magdalene at the tomb, she wanted to hug Him, but He said, *"Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father."* She wanted everything to be the way that it was before, but Jesus told her that everything was different now. Later, the disciples returned to Galilee, and they went back to their old life of fishing, but the Lord told them that they would go into the whole world and make disciples of all nations. Now they were back in Judea. The Lord brought them to the Mount of Olives. They hoped that all of their dreams for Jesus before Holy Week would now come true, so they asked Jesus, *"Lord, at this time are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"* They were still hoping that Jesus was going to establish an earthly kingdom and that they would rule with Him in this world. They were all hoping that everything would go back the way it was before Jesus' death and resurrection.

Do we ever wish that thing would go back to the way that they were *Before Christ*? Faith in Jesus Christ gives us wonderful blessings. We have the forgiveness of all of our sins because He paid for them on Calvary. We have the promise that God works all things for our good. We have the hope of everlasting life with Christ. These gifts were first given to us in baptism. In Romans 6 Paul writes that in baptism we were baptized into His death. We were buried with Christ and raised to a new life in Him. But it is tempting to want to go back to the old ways. There are many temptations that are still very appealing to our sinful nature. In Colossians 3 Paul writes that we have been raised with Christ and that our minds should be on things above where Christ has ascended. So he goes on to write, *"⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."* (Col 3:5-10) But don't we often find ourselves struggling with these temptations. Our sinful nature would rather go back to those old, sinful ways rather than to follow Christ. One of the saddest things for me as a pastor is that many people who have given up an addiction, return to it at some time. It is a big temptation to leave Christ and return to the lusts and desires of our sinful nature.

It is also tempting to want to make Jesus fit our conception of what He should be like. That is what the disciples were doing in our text. They wanted Jesus to do what they wanted Him to do. Did you ever have an idea about how God should work, and it was shown to be wrong from God's word? What do you do? Do you change your idea about God or do you hang on to it because that's the way that you think that God should be?

Faith in Jesus changes everything about us because...

- II. His ascension has changed everything for our good.

Jesus often told His disciples that it was for their good that He was going away. In John 16:7 He said, *"I tell you the truth: 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."* They did not want Him to leave, but it was for their

own good that He did. The Bible speaks of many things that Christ is doing since He ascended into Heaven. It says that He is pleading for our forgiveness to the Father. It says that He is ruling all things for the good of His people. It says that He is preparing a place for us. But it also says that He has sent His Spirit on His people. Jesus gave that promise twice in our text. He said, *“In a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”* He also said, *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses.”*

Because Jesus ascended, the Holy Spirit came on the disciples. The Spirit opened their minds to understand the Gospel. Before Pentecost the disciples were confused. They never understood Jesus’ mission. They thought that they came to set up an earthly kingdom. By the power of the Holy Spirit, they came to see that Christ’s kingdom centered around the forgiveness of sins in His name. Before Pentecost they were afraid. When Jesus was arrested, they ran. Peter even denied His Lord with curses, but after Pentecost they boldly proclaimed that there is salvation in no one else, even though that confession brought them many crosses to bear. Before Pentecost hardly anyone believed in God. The world was lost in sin. Since Pentecost and yet today the Gospel has power. It has brought people of every nation to believe that Jesus Christ is their Savior.

Without Jesus’ ascension, none of those things would have happened. People would remain confused about the Gospel, and Jesus’ few followers would be afraid and weak. But because Jesus ascended and sent the promised Holy Spirit, He has enlightened our minds as our epistle lesson says to know the power and hope that we have in Christ. Christ has redeemed us; He rules all things for our good, and He has an eternal inheritance waiting for us in heaven. The Holy Spirit opens our hearts to believe that great message. He also gives us courage. There are many times when we want to give in to temptation, but the Holy Spirit guards and keeps us in the time of temptation. When we do fall, He keeps us from getting discouraged and points us to Christ’s cross and His forgiveness again. He also gives us the words to say when we confess Christ to this world. It is not easy or fashionable to confess Christ as our Savior today, but when we do, we see how those words still have power. The Holy Spirit uses our witness to bring peace and faith and hope in Christ.

As Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples would have like to have grabbed Him and pulled Him back down. Even after He was gone, they were still staring in heaven, wishing that He would come back. He will come back, but until that time, our Lord has given His church a job to do. That job is to share the Gospel with the whole world. It seems like a big job. As new people come to faith, that also brings changes, but it is for our good that the Lord ascended. His ascension meant the sending of the Holy Spirit, so that the Gospel has also come to us, and that same Spirit will use us to bring the Gospel to even more people until the day when Christ does return for another great change. He will take us from the struggles of this world to His eternal glory forever. May He keep us firm in His grace until that day.

Amen.

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