

A Sermon for Ascension Sunday  
13 May 2018  
Trusting in Promises

**Luke 24:44-53**

<sup>44</sup>Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." <sup>45</sup>Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup>and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup>and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup>You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup>And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."  
<sup>50</sup>Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. <sup>51</sup>While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. <sup>52</sup>And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; <sup>53</sup>and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

**Acts 1:1-11**

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In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning <sup>2</sup>until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup>While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; <sup>5</sup>for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."  
<sup>6</sup>So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup>He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>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." <sup>9</sup>When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup>While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup>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."

Jesus' last earthly act is to be taken away from his disciples in a way that was utterly consistent with the rest of his ministry. It was, from the point of view of exercising power, a bizarre and paradoxical conclusion to a bizarre and paradoxical career. He just disappears into a cloud. No triumphant exit, no band playing; he doesn't even tap his communicator and ask Scotty to beam him up.

Suppose that you or I had been appointed the producers of a messianic final act. How would we, as the promoters and press agents of a resurrected Saviour, proceed with the publicity? We would have played every card we had to get him on Jimmy Kimmel, Sixty Minutes, NPR and the covers of Newsweek and Time.

In other words, we would have turned the cosmic, risen Jesus — the one who is the Resurrection and the Life of the whole world; the one who, as the creating and redeeming Word of God, is intimately and immediately present to everything that exists; the one who, when he is lifted up, draws *all* to himself; and the one who, at his coming again is everywhere at once like lightning that shines from east to west — we would have turned the universal Lord into just another sideshow freak. To put it succinctly, we would have succeeded in convincing the world of our belief that his power lay chiefly in our publicity of him and that his promises — since we gave people no reason to expect anything but right handed and therefore illusory fulfillments — were just so much hot air.

The New Testament proclaims an unlikely Saviour. The work of Jesus in his incarnation, life, passion death, resurrection, and ascension makes no *worldly* sense at all. The portrait the Gospels paint is like a lifeguard who leaps into the surf, swims to the drowning girl, and then, instead of doing a cross-chest carry, drowns with her, revives three days later, and walks off the beach with assurances that everything, including the apparently still-dead girl, is hunky-dory.

You do not like that? Neither do I. But I submit that it is — unless we are prepared to ignore both the Gospels and the ensuing two thousand years' worth of tombstones with bodies still under them — very much like what the Man actually said and did. And — to come to the main point at last — it is the Ascension of Jesus, and the Ascension alone, that keeps us from missing the reason for his doing it that way.

For by ascending, by making a *departure* from this world the capstone of all his earthly acts, he underscores once and for all what he said with ever-increasing clarity through his whole ministry. The kingdom of God, the Ascension insists, does not come about because of what the world does to itself — nor even, in any obvious sense, because of what God does to the world. The Ascension insists that the kingdom already exists in the King himself, and when he ascends, the whole world goes with him. (John 12:32)

In other words, it is not that someday Jesus will do this, that, and the other thing, and then the Kingdom will come. It is not, for example, that *at some future date* the dead will rise or that in *some distant consummation* we will reign with him. Rather, it is that we have already been buried with him in baptism, and that we are already risen with him through faith in the operation of God who raised him from the dead, and that we are now — in this and every moment — enthroned together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

But wait, there's more. It is not that, after some further series of transactions the city of God — so long mired and sin and failure — will finally be built. Rather, it is that the city, like the kingdom, is already an accomplished fact in Jesus himself. We are invited not to make it happen, but to believe that it *is* and to let it come. It exists, in other words, because in Jesus the world is already the Bride adorned for her husband, because we now sit as his wife at the marriage supper of the Lamb — because, once and for all, now and not then, he has taken the drowned girl home in the mystery of his death, resurrection, and ascension and presented her to his Father as the Holy City, the New Jerusalem.

I am aware that many of us, when we read the passages and images that I have just referred to, give them an exclusively future interpretation. But in light of the Ascension, it seems to me, that simply won't work. Jesus says he *is*, not *will be*, the Way, the Truth and the Life. He insists to Martha — who quite plausibly figured that her brother Lazarus would rise again on the last day — that he, the Christ himself, is the Resurrection and the Life right now. And he raises Lazarus then and there to drive the point home.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus points relentlessly to himself (“believe in *me*”) as the mysterious centre from which and in which the Father reconciles the world to himself. Therefore, when he ascends — when he goes away, promising an imminent return — what can that mean but that he has the city fully in hand and ready to be delivered? He always had the whole world in his arms; what the Ascension uniquely proclaims is that he's got the kingdom in his pocket.

To be sure, at the point of his departure, he has it in a highly mysterious pocket: as far as we are concerned we will not see it openly until the delivery is actually made. But that is not because sometime between his Ascension and his Second Coming he will have gotten down to brass tacks and made real what was only virtual. It is only because we can't see mysteries. On the last day, Jesus will not do anything new; he will simply make manifest what he has been doing all along — what in fact, he has long since done by preparing for us a kingdom from the foundation of the world. It will be in seeing him, as *he is*, that it will finally dawn on us what, in him, we have always been.

What clinches the argument that the Ascension is the proclamation of a mysterious, left-handed kingdom (already actual in the King himself) is the fact that Jesus discourages any speculation about why he is going or what plans he might have for coming back. The apostles are specifically told that times, seasons, and schedules of events are none of their business. Their relationship to the mystery of the kingdom is to be based not on their knowledge or performance, and certainly not on their guesswork about God's plans; it is to be rooted only in trust in his promise. They are to believe only in the King. Everything else is out of their hands, beyond their ken, and both literally and parabolically over their heads.

The reason that the early church did not fall apart when Jesus failed to return with any reasonable promptness was that they saw the Ascension and the Second Coming chiefly as matters of promise. It was not right-handed intelligible timetables that kept the first Christians strong in the lord, their faithfulness to the kingdom resisted solely on the left-handed promise of the King himself. No questions asked; no answers given; just “Amen, come Lord Jesus.”

And that is truly a comfort to us, both theologically and pastorally. Not a single specific prediction over the last two thousand years has ever come true. But a promise is a promise; whether its fulfilment takes ten seconds or ten billion years, the simple act of trusting it puts us fully, if mysteriously, in the very centre of its power.

One thing to add. In our Gospel lesson today, when Jesus ascended he not only said he would return; he also promised to endue his church with power from on high. Happily enough, that promise was fulfilled promptly, within two weeks. We celebrate that occasion on Pentecost, next week. Unfortunately the church mistakenly expected that the Holy Spirit would deliver in plausible, right-handed ways that Jesus never did. Instead of the mystery of a kingdom fully accomplished in the risen and ascended King, we were handed a vision of a kingdom which would be accomplished with a series of intelligible, selective patch jobs. The Good News of a city founded on grace for everybody became the bad news of a suburb for spiritual millionaires. Unless you were well practiced in your spiritual exercises, you would get left out. Jesus said, loud and clear, “I, if I be lifted up, will draw *all* to myself”; the church, louder and clearer insisted that he only meant *some*.

Jesus insists throughout his ministry that spiritual works no more bring in the kingdom than moral or intellectual ones. The death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus — especially the Ascension, since it is the final affirmation of the hands-off policy of the other two — proclaim that *no* meddling, divine or human, spiritual or material, can save the world. Its only salvation is in the mystery of the King who dies, rises and disappears, and who asks us simply to trust his promise that, in him, we have the kingdom already.