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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

*I Believe in the Ascension and Return of Jesus*

Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:9–11

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series: The Apostles' Creed

Jeremy Lin plays point guard for the New York Knicks of the NBA. Last Monday night he scored 28 points against the Utah Jazz. Though he was a very good basketball player at Palo Alto High, no one thought he'd ever play in the NBA. Everyone knew he was smart. He graduated with a 4.2 GPA and went to Harvard. But there had never been an American-born NBA player of Chinese or Taiwanese descent. So it wasn't surprising when he was passed over in the 2010 NBA draft after a decent college career. He did raise some eyebrows when he signed a contract with the Golden State Warriors. But after being demoted to the D-League last year, this year the Warriors cut him before the season even started. Houston claimed him but cut him two weeks later, and then the Knicks claimed him because they were desperate for a point guard. You might say up until now Jeremy Lin's talents have been under appreciated!

This morning we're considering what I believe is the most under appreciated aspect of our Christian faith: the ascension of Jesus. Even as I say that, some of you are wondering, "What's that?" But the ascension of Jesus is an essential part of what we believe. The Apostles' Creed affirms this when it says of Jesus, *He ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.* The early church felt this was so important they made Ascension Day a part of the church calendar alongside Easter and Christmas. St. Augustine even said Ascension Day was celebrated by the apostles.

Even more important is the testimony of Scripture. The Ascension is predicted in the Old Testament (Ps. 24). Almost every New Testament writer mentions it at least once. It was so important to Luke he describes the event twice. First, at the end of his gospel he writes,

**When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God (Luke 24:50–53).**

Then at the start of Acts, he writes,

**After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "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" (Acts 1:9–11).**

I can understand why this was an important day for Jesus. He's the eternal Son of God who had descended so far and given up so much, and now He's heading home! He's like a soldier finally going home after a long and bloody war, or an astronaut shedding his space suit to breathe the familiar atmosphere of earth. It reminds me of something Jesus prayed at the Last Supper: *"I have brought you glory on earth by finishing 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). He sounds like someone reminiscing about his childhood home. For Jesus, that was heaven "before the world began." I can understand why the Ascension was a big day for Him.

But why is it so important for us? When it's all over the disciples are left looking at a blank sky, and yet Luke tells us they were filled with joy. I don't think they wanted Him to go, but something clicked for them when they saw Him ascend.

So let me ask the question: why **did** He have to ascend? Let me put it another way—what if it never happened? What if the gospel writers witnessed the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, but left the ascension out? Wouldn't that have been enough? What difference does the ascension make in my life? I'd like to tell you today that without the ascension the work of Jesus would be incomplete, and that would have profound implications for you and me.

**If Jesus did not ascend, He'd still be making appearances.**

The most obvious thing is if He didn't ascend, He'd still be here with us in flesh and blood. When Jesus rose from the dead, it was a bodily resurrection. He ate with His disciples. He showed Thomas His wounds. He made a series of appearances to His followers over the course of 40 days, but that couldn't go on forever. It would be very weird if His appearances became fewer until finally they petered out. "Hey, where's Jesus? He hasn't shown up lately. Someone go find him." No, there had to be a dividing day when the resurrection appearances stopped and the Jesus of earth became the Christ of heaven. The ascension was the clear conclusion to the life of Jesus on earth. It was the day when the disciples stopped depending on His physical flesh and blood

presence. Now they and future disciples like us were linked to someone who was independent of space and time.

### **If Jesus did not ascend, He wouldn't have sent His Spirit.**

Which leads to the second thing. If Jesus didn't ascend, He wouldn't have sent His Spirit to be with us. Remember something else Jesus said in the upper room? He said, *"It is for your good that I am going away."* How could it be good? In the next breath Jesus explained, *"Unless I go away, the Advocate (Helper) will not come to you; but if I go I will send him to you"* (Jn 16:7). He's talking, of course, about the Holy Spirit. In the book of Acts, the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost follows on the heels of the Ascension. Augustine once wrote of what the disciples experienced, "You ascended from before our eyes, and we turned back grieving, only to find you in our hearts." When someone loses a loved one, I often hear them say, "We'll never forget her. She'll always live in our hearts." As comforting as that is, it's not what we're talking about here. We're talking about the Holy Spirit of God, the third person of the Trinity, the one Jesus called "another Helper," coming to live within us.

We know the Holy Spirit shows up in the Bible as early as the creation account where it says the Spirit of God was *"hovering over the surface of the deep."* Then in the Old Testament we see the Spirit empowering certain leaders like judges, kings and prophets. Yet the anointing of the Spirit was limited to a few key individuals for only a limited time. But at Pentecost a new epoch began in which all believers are filled with the Spirit. The prophet Joel looked forward to this new era: *"And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days"* (Joel 2:28–29).

So now, through the Spirit within us, we enjoy an inward life of fellowship with the Father and the Son wherever we go. This fellowship isn't dependent on or limited by physical geography, as it would be if Jesus were still here in flesh and blood. It doesn't matter what we have to go through; He'll never be taken from us. Wherever we are, whatever we must endure, He's in us, and we are in Him.

### **If Jesus did not ascend, He wouldn't be seated at God's right hand.**

Here's another reason the ascension is so important. If Jesus didn't ascend, He couldn't have been seated at God's right hand. That's why the Creed says: *he's seated at the right hand of God the Father.*

What does that mean? It means Jesus has finished the work of redemption and has been given the place of highest honor. Hebrews 1:3 says, *"When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high"* (Heb. 1:3).

The right hand of God is a place of honor and authority. This goes back to the time when warriors carried a shield in their left hand and a sword in their right. As a result, they were more vulnerable from their right side (no shield) and so they'd put their most trusted warrior at their right. So the custom evolved of having the most honored advisor of a king sitting on his right side. Even in some circles today, it's customary to seat the guest of honor to the right of the host. Phil 2:9 says, *"God has exalted him to the highest place and given him the name that is above every name."* In this exalted position, Jesus is crowned King of kings and Lord of lords.

Think of it this way: When you try to go to another world, there's incredible danger. In 1967, there was a launch pad test of Apollo 1, which was to be the first flight of a three-man Apollo capsule into earth's orbit. Something went wrong in the capsule's 31 miles of wiring. Early in the flight, astronaut Roger Chaffee said, "We've got fire in the cockpit." A few seconds later, the transmission ended with a cry of pain. All three astronauts died.

Two years later, when Apollo 11 got ready to carry human beings to the moon, President Nixon had a speech ready just in case anything went wrong. The plan was radio communications with the moon would be cut off, the astronauts would be left alone to die, Nixon would read the speech on TV and a minister would commend their souls to "the deepest of the deep."

But that's not what happened. On July 20, 1969, with less than 30 seconds of fuel left, the lunar module landed and Neil Armstrong stepped off the ladder onto the moon. It was the first time a human had ever gone to another celestial body.

After their return to earth, the astronauts had parades and dinners held in their honor. Nixon gave each astronaut the Presidential Medal of Freedom. It was quite a celebration! We'd just accomplished the greatest technological achievement of all time.

Jesus went on a similar mission. He achieved the greatest act of salvation of all time, and then He went through the clouds and splashed down on heaven's shores. Then the celebration started. He'd done it! He'd just completed the most dangerous, important mission of all time. He'd faced every temptation but never gave into sin. He stood up to the intense hatred of people; He could have called legions of angels to rescue Him, but He willingly obeyed God and fulfilled His mission of giving up His life as a sacrifice to bring people back to God. He defeated the devil. He destroyed death. Now He's returned in victory. The Father welcomes the Son home and seats Him at His right hand, the place of highest honor and authority.

Why do we celebrate the Ascension? Because all heaven celebrates the victorious return of the Son, the Lamb who was slain, the Lion who conquered, the One who says in joy and power: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."*

## **If Jesus did not ascend, He would not be interceding for us.**

But that's not all. In the ascension we see Jesus as the exalted King, but we also see Him as our great High Priest who makes intercession for us. If Jesus didn't ascend, we couldn't do that. Remember, Israel had a High Priest. He was the only one who could go into the Holy of Holies in the temple, and he only did that once a year on the Day of Atonement. But unlike the High Priest of Israel, Jesus takes up residence in the ultimate Holy of Holies to undertake a continual ministry of intercession for us. Hebrews 7:24–25 says since *"he has a permanent priesthood... he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."* So there is a very real sense in which His work continues in heaven as He intercedes for us.

This ought to bring us great comfort. Don't you love it when someone tells you they're praying for you? Let's face it, sometimes a person says that and you wonder if they really mean it. We're not sure if they really **will** pray for us. But some people say that and we know they mean it. And it means even more to us if we see them to be particularly close to God. By the way, that's why Roman Catholics pray to the saints and to Mary, because they see them as closer to God and therefore see their prayers as more effective. But get this: Jesus, the great High Priest of heaven is continually praying for you.

What's He praying for? Remember the prayer Jesus made for us in John 17? He prayed for us, His followers. He prayed for our protection from the evil one. He prayed for our unity. He prayed we'd be set apart and made holy through His word. He prayed we'd know His joy. He prayed we'd walk in such close fellowship with Him that the world would see God's love in us and believe in Him as a result. He prayed we'd one day be with Him and behold His glory. Now if Jesus Christ prayed these things for you while He was on earth, don't you think the Father will grant His requests now that He's seated at God's right hand? And shouldn't that give you and me a sense of security? Shouldn't that bolster our faith in the midst of trial and temptation?

Listen to Hebrews 4:14–16, *"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. 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. 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."*

## **If Jesus did not ascend, He would not be coming again.**

If Jesus didn't ascend, He'd still be making appearances, He wouldn't have sent His Spirit, He wouldn't be seated at God's

right hand and He wouldn't be making intercession for us. But there's still one more thing. He wouldn't be coming again.

Luke was a practical person. He tells us of the disciples with their eyes straining to catch the last glimpse of the cloud bearing up the Lord. But then they were quickly brought back to reality. With their eyes heavenward they didn't notice the two angels who had slipped quietly alongside them. They said, *"Men of Galilee... 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"* (Acts 1:11). It's almost like the Lord's return will be a film of the Ascension played backwards. But there's one difference: it won't be a private viewing. Revelation says when He returns *"every eye will see him"* (Rev 1:7). He ascended alone but He'll return in the company of millions of the redeemed from all ages (1 Thess 4:13).

As the Creed says, the Ascension reminds us *he will come again to judge the living and the dead*. The disciples weren't promised they'd see the return of Jesus. The time is left open. It's futile to speculate as to when it will happen. If anyone ever tries to set a date for you, **run** in the other direction. They're wrong! Jesus told us that not even **He** knows the day or hour when He'll come (Mk 13:22). But the certainty is there. So we believe God is working His purposes out for this world and when He's ready Jesus will return just as surely as He ascended. The all-important, practical call of the ascension is that we're ready for His return.

How can we be ready? Several years ago Philip Yancey wrote a fine book called, *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Chapter 12 is about the Ascension. He observes at the end of the gospel of Matthew there are several parables, which all have a common theme lurking in the background. In one an owner leaves his house vacant; in another an absentee landlord puts his servant in charge while he's gone; in the third a bridegroom arrives so late his guests have grown drowsy and fall asleep; and in the fourth a master distributes talents among his servants and then leaves. All four of these parables address the issue of our Lord's absence and return. The idea is He's gone but He's coming back. When He comes back there will be a judgment, a reckoning. All will be held accountable for what we've done while He was gone.

But then there's one more parable. It's the one where Jesus comes back and separates the sheep and the goats. He says to the sheep, *"Come into my kingdom which has been prepared for you since the foundation of the world. I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I was in prison and you came to see me."* And then they said, *"Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you? When were you thirsty and we gave you something to drink? When were you a stranger and we invited you in? When were you in prison and we visited you?"* The Lord replied, *"Whatever you did for one of the least of these*

*brothers of mine, you did for me.*" And of course the goats were sent to hell because of what they didn't do for "the least of these."

How can we be ready for His return? By seeing Him in the least of these. In the time between His ascension and His return, He's absent, but in a strange way He's also present in "the least of these." If we can't detect His presence in the world, we may be looking in the wrong places. Yancey writes, "Jesus knew the world he left behind would include the poor, the hungry, the prisoners, the sick. The decrepit state of the world didn't surprise him. He made plans to cope with it: a long range plan and a short range plan. The long range plan involves his return, in power and in great glory, to straighten out planet earth. The short range plans means turning it over to the ones who will ultimately usher in the liberation of the cosmos. He ascended so we would take his place."

In light of His return, we have to ask ourselves the question, "Are we doing what He's called us to do?" We've been left here for a purpose. Our placement in this world, our jobs, our neighborhood, our family, isn't an accident. The angels asked the disciples, "*Why do you stand here looking into the sky?*" It was the earth, not the sky, we should be occupied with. We're called to be witnesses, not stargazers. Our calling is not upwards in nostalgia, but outwards in compassion to a lost world that needs Jesus.

For some, this prospect of judgment is frightening. But if you're one who has trusted in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, you have nothing to fear. Here's your comfort: judgment is in the hands of your Redeemer! Judgment is in the hands of the One who said, "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son*" (Jn 3:17-18). Ultimately, as we confront the judge of all creation, all we can do is trust, not in our good deeds, but in the One who suffered, died, rose and ascended for our sake.

But, as Jesus reminds here, not everyone believes. So as we think about the ascended Jesus seated in that position of ultimate authority, ready to intercede on our behalf, promising to come again, we must ask ourselves the question: have we acknowledged Him as our Lord and King; have we knelt before Him in glad allegiance; have we trusted in the name of God's one and only Son? Your judge can also be your redeemer and savior if you will just turn to Him in repentance and faith.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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