

## **2 Kings 2:7-15**

<sup>7</sup> Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. <sup>8</sup> Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. <sup>9</sup> When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?” “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied. <sup>10</sup> “You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.”

<sup>11</sup> As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. <sup>12</sup> Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

<sup>13</sup> Elisha then picked up Elijah’s cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. <sup>14</sup> He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. “Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. <sup>15</sup> The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, “The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.” And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.

## **Acts 1:1-11**

<sup>1</sup> In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup> until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> After his suffering, he presented himself to them 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. <sup>4</sup> On 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. <sup>5</sup> For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>6</sup> Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” <sup>7</sup> He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But 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.”

<sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. <sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> “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.”

## “He Ascended Into Heaven . . .”

*Where is Jesus now? What is he doing? Why is he taking so long to return?* These are questions that we sometimes ask. They are *good* questions, but they are not particularly *original* questions; they were also asked by 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians and so Luke addresses this matter in the book of Acts. Acts was written after the destruction of the Temple and he tells us that the young Church was dispersed through the known world by politics and persecution. In such tough times it is only natural to ask those kinds of questions, times when followers of Jesus – then and in every generation - look for hope and answers. (As we have just heard,) Luke begins his second volume with a description of Christ’s ascension and this coming Thursday is Ascension Day, the day that Christians worldwide celebrate the risen Jesus as returning to God the Father. This is also an appropriate reading for an Anniversary Service because it reminds us that there is still work to be done here on Earth. So let’s explore how Luke responds to those kinds of questions.

***Where is Jesus now?*** Luke ends his gospel with a description of the resurrection of Jesus and his appearances to his followers.<sup>1</sup> However, a bodily resurrection demands an explanation for Christ’s physical *absence*, and of all the gospel writers only Luke in Acts really addresses that matter. It’s curious, don’t you think, that all the gospels provide some detail about the resurrection but don’t provide more information on the ascension? I suggest it is because they knew where Jesus had gone to and they were not troubled by the specifics of the process by which he got there!

Jesus is now with God the Father. Luke articulates this in language and imagery that is meaningful to 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews and non-Jews. He *has* to use such pictures because he is attempting to *describe the indescribable*. What he writes is this: “As [the disciples] were watching, [Jesus] was *lifted up*, and a *cloud took him* out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.”<sup>2</sup> The *literalistic* interpretation gives the impression that ‘heaven’ is geographically “up” and that Jesus departed by vertical takeoff, escaping the earth’s gravity like a rocket man! This kind of comical image has been portrayed in great works of art for many centuries. Heaven is *not* a locality situated somewhere “upwards.” ‘Heaven’ in the Bible is God’s space and ‘earth’ is our space; I like to envisage them as two different dimensions that are very close together. In the ascension, Jesus is simply being taken into God’s space. Clearly the ascension was distinctly different from the resurrection for Luke, but it was neither literalistic (Jesus was the first spaceman) nor metaphorical (his spirit lives on but there was no bodily resurrection); rather, these events demand we rethink what we know about the way the universe works and God’s action in history.

In Luke’s time, people expected God to meet prophets on mountains, where earth meets the sky – in this case the Mount of Olives. To a Jew, a cloud symbolises God’s faithful presence with his liberated

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<sup>1</sup> See Luke 24.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:9-10.

people in their journey through the wilderness in the exodus from Egypt. A cloud also commonly signifies the presence of God, as in the case of Moses being with God on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments.<sup>3</sup> The ascension would also remind Jews of the traditions of Elijah going to God's space, which was our Old Testament reading for today. Moreover, two witnesses are needed to provide proper authentication, like at the Transfiguration,<sup>4</sup> and so we have two angelic men in white. Furthermore, Roman emperors who died were customarily declared divine<sup>5</sup> by having 1 or 2 witnesses claiming to have seen the departed souls going up to the realm of the gods. So in addition to a religious meaning, Luke's hearers would have understood Christ's ascension as having a political significance too. This resurrection-ascension package can therefore be thought of as divine *vindication* of Jesus the Messiah, who was obedient to God and even willing to die. That being the case, this resurrection-ascension package is God's radical demonstration that evil will not have the last word.

But in addition to vindication, this "ascent" or "lifting up" signifies the *enthronement* of Jesus the Messiah.<sup>6</sup> Luke spells this out explicitly, using yet another metaphor, in Peter's first sermon: Jesus is now "*seated at the right hand of God,*" which we have just affirmed in the Creed.<sup>7</sup> This "exaltation" language indicates Jesus has been given supreme power and authority.<sup>8</sup> That status is also stated at the conclusion of Matthew's gospel, where we read "Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.'"<sup>9</sup> So, Jesus had been *lifted up* to die on a cross, *raised up* from the dead, and is now *elevated* to kingship! The political message to Luke's readers is that Jesus is the real king, not Caesar. "It may not look like it now," says Luke, "but that is because you are focusing on the wrong object and need to adapt your thinking accordingly." The rest of Acts can be understood as addressing what that kingship, or reigning, looks like – in other words addressing the question: **"What is Jesus doing now?"**

I want to move on to that question by making a connection with what Jesus was doing between the Resurrection and the Ascension. Luke tells us Jesus was speaking to them about the kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup> *The resurrected Jesus was making sure his followers had the message straight!* Even so, after all that, the disciples ask: "Lord, is this the time when you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"<sup>11</sup> There is sense of eagerness and impatience. This is analogous to the "Are we nearly there yet?" question children ask 10 minutes after you set off on a long road-trip! You see, Jews were vividly conscious of being God's chosen people. They took that to mean that they were destined for special privilege and for worldwide power. Even after the exile and being overthrown by Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, they still looked forward to the day when God would break directly

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<sup>3</sup> Exod 19:9,16.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 9:28-36, see also: Mark 9:2-8; Matt 17:1-8 and 2 Pet 1:16-18.

<sup>5</sup> i.e., as a "son of god."

<sup>6</sup> See also 1 Cor 15: 20-28.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 2:33-36.

<sup>8</sup> See also: 1 Pet 3:22, 1 Cor 15: 20-28, Heb 1:3, 10:12, Eph 1:20-23, Col 3:1.

<sup>9</sup> Matt 28:18.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 1:3. Luke says the same thing in Acts 1:1, "In the first book, I wrote about all that Jesus did *and taught* from the beginning *until the day when he was taken up to heaven...*"

<sup>11</sup> Acts 1:6.

into human history and established a new world order, the kind of which they had only dreamt. A time when the nations of the world would be judged for their wickedness and the blessing God promised Israel would come at last upon the whole of creation. This explains their question: “Is this the time . . .” They thought of the kingdom in purely geopolitical terms.

I wonder if Jesus was frustrated, or patient, or rolled his eyes, or sighed, or just silently prayed “Help!” He may have tried to remind them that *just* as they would need to lose their lives in order to save them,<sup>12</sup> so they had to lose their dreams of ordinary earthly kingdoms in order to gain them. The kingdom of God is *not* about an earthly kingdom or a Christian nation, but neither is it about a heavenly kingdom either. God’s kingdom is coming *in* and *through* the work Jesus, not by taking people away *from* this world but by transforming things *within* this world, bringing the sphere of the Earth under the rule of heaven itself. In the familiar Lord’s Prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven” is like Hebrew poetry; the second phrase repeats and amplifies the first, they mean the same thing. When what God wants done here *is* done, that is a sign of the reign of God. It is a kingdom founded on love not power, and it grows step by step. With Christ’s coming, the kingdom has begun, with his ascension, he is now king, but the full completion has yet to happen. “Is this the time?” “No, not yet!”<sup>13</sup> Jesus tells his followers, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.”<sup>14</sup> Consequently, a feature of this ascension narrative is about *waiting*; we live in this interim time with its daily experiences of uncertainty. Like the disciples, we have to be both patient *and* active in this “now-and-not-yet” kingdom of God.

The disciples’ question, like some of our own, was really one about *power* and *control* – in this case political power. Jesus understood that, and framed his reply accordingly: “*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>15</sup> “Restoring the kingdom” is not about securing autonomy within certain political boundaries, rather, says Jesus, it is about being my *witnesses* – or testifying about me and the kingdom of God - from Jerusalem to “the ends of the world,” which is likely a euphemism for Rome. *God’s reign will be established by a Spirit-empowered mission on earth.* And this point is confirmed by how Luke ends the book of Acts: “[Paul] lived [in Rome].....*proclaiming the kingdom of God* and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with *all boldness and without hindrance.*”<sup>16</sup> All that goes on within Acts is an incremental fulfilment of Christ’s commission; the spread of the Church is a *sign* of Christ’s reign – although there is *much* more to come!

*What is Jesus going now?* He is reigning and, through his Spirit-empowered Church, is steadily transforming the world and bringing all things under his rule. That is Luke’s overall theme of Acts. It was not an easy message then and neither is it today, because the kingdom of God does not spread effortlessly into a vacuum but is challenged at every step. *We still* wait for the time when the whole

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<sup>12</sup> Luke 9:24.

<sup>13</sup> Incidentally, such time-related questions, just as “*Why is he taking so long to return?*” never get answered.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 1:7.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 1:8. (Note: the Greek word for “power” is “*dynamis*,” from which we get the word “dynamite.”)

<sup>16</sup> Acts 28:30-31.

world is visibly and clearly living under God's just and healing rule. As we live in between Christ's ascension and return, we are called to be a part of Christ's cloud of witnesses<sup>17</sup> from here to the ends of the world.

**That may all be very well, you say, but what might be the relevance or "application" for us today, here at St Andrew's Amherstburg on its 190<sup>th</sup> Anniversary?**

Two things: a *gentle reprimand* and a *reminder of a promise*. Within a few opening verses of Acts Luke manages to reprove the enthusiasm and speculation of those Christians who persist in asking, "Is this the time . . . when Jesus will return?" On the other hand, in these verses Luke also reprimands the despair and stodginess of churches that strives to function without the hope that Christ *will*, in fact, return - as the angels affirmed. I do not believe the risen and ascended Jesus wants *either*. To make that last point more vivid, I want to paraphrase the words of the two heavenly messengers: "Hey people," they say, "Why are you just standing here gawping into empty space? This very Jesus who was taken from among you to be with God will come *as certainly—and as mysteriously*—as he left." Consequently, we can be *confident* the kingdom's complete fulfillment *will* come in God's good time; the resurrection and ascension assures it. Moreover, the *very existence* of the worldwide church, of which St. Andrew's is a part, is firm evidence that God *will* accomplish his vision and mission.

The question we have to ask ourselves today is simply this: "*Do we buy this story of the ascension?*" Do we believe that Jesus is truly reigning as king? If not, what is the alternative narrative to which we are committed? If so, how can we *better* work with King Jesus to work for his kingdom?

And that brings us to the next point. Jesus knew that the disciples could not undertake their mission in their own strength, just as Elisha knew he could not be the prophetic successor to Elijah without special divine assistance. Luke tells us Jesus gives us a *promise*: a promise that the same Spirit that empowered his ministry will be present with the Church. "Hey people", the heavenly messengers say, "Why do you just stand here gawping into empty space? *There is a job to do here and the power of the Holy Spirit by which to do it.*" Christ was just one person. He *had* to ascend so that his Spirit could then be given to his witnesses in order for the gospel to spread throughout the world. The same Holy Spirit that worked in and through Jesus and his followers is promised *to us all*. Well-meaning though our efforts may be, Jesus warned his followers *not* to undertake kingdom work without divine assistance. The job is too hard and we will become discouraged, burn out, and – ultimately - fail. This is a huge temptation for churches today, because we live in a go-it-alone culture. If we do not ask for God's help, we have no right to expect to expect to receive it!

In conclusion, there was a very real danger that this Jesus movement would fizzle out with the ascension. That would have happened if the kingdom of God was based solely on the charisma of its

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<sup>17</sup> See Heb 12:1-3.

leader.<sup>18</sup> That warning can be applied to *any* church which wistfully longs for some departed leader, and the Church would then become a memorial society. However, with an ending of one phase, there is a new beginning. *Our vision is to look forward to new directions and adventures*, not backward, wishing things could simply stay fixed at a certain moment in time. Let us therefore look forward with assurance as to God's continued presence, and partner with him in the next chapter on the kingdom of God work here at St Andrew's. That is, I believe, what Christ passionately wants all his followers to do. Luke tells us the disciples went back to Jerusalem to wait and pray.<sup>19</sup> And the promised Holy Spirit came in power at Pentecost. As we wait for Pentecost, let us do so with eagerness and expectation, ready for the Holy Spirit to come *afresh* in power, both as a church and as individuals. Amen.

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<sup>18</sup> Luke articulated that same danger earlier at the Transfiguration when Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three shelters, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah" (Luke 9:33). In other words, let's just stay here, on the top of the mountain, rather than go down and face a needy world.

<sup>19</sup> Acts 1:14.