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Sermon

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Ascension

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Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Acts 1:6-11; Luke 24:44-53

What does it mean? Why the fuss about Ascension Day?

Let's review the accounts. Luke tells us of those events twice over. At the end of his gospel in essence he says that after the resurrection, Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples, takes them out near Bethany which is just over the brow of the Mt of Olives from Jerusalem. There as he blesses them, he is taken up into heaven.

In Acts, after some discussion about the timetable of future events, Jesus redirects them to dependence on the Holy Spirit and the task of being his witnesses in Jerusalem, Israel and to the end of the world. Then he is taken up and a cloud took him from their sight.

This not being quite an everyday occurrence in their experience, they continue to stare into the sky. But there is more. Suddenly two men in white appear beside them and these angels say, "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."

Again, what does it mean?

Mission accomplished

First of all it means, mission accomplished. Jesus had done what he came to do. What did he come to do? He came on a rescue mission. He came to deal with sin. He came to secure eternal life for us.

Having announced, "It is finished," on the cross and proven it by rising from the dead, he had now given them time to believe that he really was alive. He had given them these 40 days to come to understand the teachings he could now unpack for them in the light of his victory. By leaving he was affirming that he had done what he came to do.

That means his death on the cross has paid for sin for those who put their trust in him. That means he really had done everything necessary for us to have a loving relationship as the accepted children of God.

Jesus rules

Luke naturally gives us the disciples' viewpoint of this event. Daniel in his vision is shown the event as it is seen from heaven. The disciples are gazing up into the heavens. Daniel is given the heavenly viewpoint and sees the arrival of Jesus into the courtroom of heaven. Luke and Daniel

both described the movement with clouds – appropriately for the one who is described repeatedly in the Old Testament as riding on the clouds.

First Daniel is shown that throne room. There is the Ancient of Days – that is God Almighty - seated on a throne with millions of angels attending him. His majesty, wisdom and power are described symbolically. Then he sees “...one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven.”

From the following comments we learn this is God the Son. He is in human form, he comes with the clouds of heaven, just as he was received into the clouds of heaven when the disciples saw his departure. And he is brought to the Father. There he is honoured. He is given “authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worship him.” Only God may legitimately be treated like that. Daniel learns that, “His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

Daniel’s vision shows us Jesus receiving his glory again from the Father. He is regarded as an equal with the Father. This is the reverse of the stripping of divine glory in order to live as a man. Now he receives back the former glory he had from eternity past.

References to this event are surprisingly common in the Epistles – here is Paul writing to the Philippians:

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”¹

There is a very significant point hidden in there. Paul quotes from Isaiah 45 where the Lord (Yahweh) says:

“Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: **Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.**”²

Do you see it? Paul has quoted a text where God says every knee will bow to him and every tongue will swear or confess him and directly applied it to Jesus! By doing that Paul is saying that Jesus is Yahweh – Jesus is God.

In other words, Jesus has not just worked some miracles. Jesus has not just dealt with our sins. He hasn’t just won the victory of death. Jesus is now reigning with God the Father on the throne of the universe.

The ruler of the universe calls us brothers and sisters. The one who has all authority has made a covenant with you which we remember and restate every time we take communion. We don’t just have a friend in court. The Almighty is committed to us.

If that weren’t enough, the risen and ascended Christ prays for us. Heb 7:25: “he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”

The Ascension means the Mission is accomplished and Jesus reigns. What else does it mean?

He is able to give gifts

Twice it is stated that because he has ascended he is able to give us gifts. Jesus says in John 16:7:

“But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”

He does not say why it is so, just that he must leave in order to send the Holy Spirit to us.

Secondly, Paul says that when Jesus ascended he gave gifts to the Church of Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors and Teachers. Ephesians 4:8:

¹ Philippians 2:9

² Isaiah 45:22-25

This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men."

He will return with blessing

Finally, here is a bonus point. The disciples see him raise his hands to bless them. They see the scars, they receive his blessing, he ascends into the cloud.

The angels say he will come back in the same way that he went. So he will come back from the sky and clouds descending.

We know the world will be terrified and will flee for cover when he returns. But Christians – will they see him in the same way he left, with nail-scarred hands raised in blessing?

The first thing is the sign of the penalty paid so we can be sure of our acceptance by God. Will they not therefore receive him with joy?

Does the Ascension matter? It tells us:

Mission accomplished

Jesus is glorified and reigns on high with all authority.

He gives gifts to his people

He will return with blessing.

So is it just theoretically important. No, there is a practical outworking for us today.

If we take a look at the endings of Matthew and Mark, we find they also refer to these parting events.

Matthew reports Jesus' words that all power and authority are given to him – and the consequence of that is: Go and make disciples!

Mark tells of the commission to go and spread the gospel: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."³

Then there is the promise of divine empowerment - more of the gifts Jesus gives to empower his Church.

And Jesus ascends:

"After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it."⁴

The outcome is action! The disciples went out and preached!

But note that comment: "And the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word." Matthew passes on his promise, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." How we need him with us and working with us.

Church, because Jesus has ascended, because he has all power and authority we are commissioned to tell people about him, of what he does, what he has done in our lives.

Last year we had the encouragement of hearing Moses Chin and Given Gaula preach here. They gave us examples of active evangelists. Moses calmly dividing Indonesia into quarters and making a start on evangelism there – undaunted. Given facing opposition from animist and muslim tribesmen, just steps up the preaching. As you heard last week, he has already held a mission last month with 46 Church Army Evangelists from Kenya visiting 6000 homes and winning 400 souls to Christ.

We need to get serious about obeying Jesus in this matter. Most of us are convinced we cannot do it. But really we will not. Well there is hope for us.

³ Mark 16:15

⁴ Mark 16:19-20

Last week, I showed you a video clip about the Hope Project. Seventeen from our two congregations attended the Roadshow presentations this week. In my view, it is an ambitious but do-able project if churches like us will commit to it. For it to go ahead, we must pray, give and become willing to talk to people – just a bit.

Why do I say, there is hope for us? Because Dave Mann who is behind this knows what we are most Christians in NZ are like and has designed the project to match both our culture's dislike of being preached at and our fear. The material he is making available will help us start to have simple, unthreatening conversations with people to start them thinking. Later in the year, we will work together on that. But right now for the project to go ahead, video and printing contracts have to be let and that means money must be provided.

If we want to reach our nation with the love and forgiveness of Jesus, this is the best opportunity that has come along for decades.

I am giving each of you some material today. Please read it. Please pray about how much you will give. And next week we will take up an offering for this project.

Jesus said, "Go into all the world and make disciples..."

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