

September 20, 2020 by Steve Brandon



The Ascension

Acts 1:9-11

1. Lifted Up (verse 9)
2. Sitting Down
3. Coming Back (verses 10-11)

The church calendar, or, more technically, the liturgical calendar, is a yearly cycle of seasons in which churches all around the world celebrate the same events at the same time. At Rock Valley Bible Church, we don't rely too much on the church calendar. However, there are some events that we celebrate, which are on the church calendar. **Christmas** is the obvious one. For centuries, Christians have celebrated the birth of Christ on December 25, not because that's when Jesus was born, but because it's a nice time to celebrate the incarnation. We have joined in that tradition, of celebrating Christmas on December 25th.

We also celebrate **Easter** with the rest of the world. This is the day that we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. That's why many call it "Resurrection Sunday." The exact date of Easter changes with the moon. Technically, it's the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox (if that makes sense to you). It's usually sometime in late March or early April.

Backing up from Resurrection Sunday morning, there are some key dates on the Liturgical calendar. **Good Friday** is the day we remember the death of Jesus on the cross. **Palm Sunday** is the Sunday before Easter, when we remember Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey to a cheering crowd. **Ash Wednesday** is forty days before Easter.

At Rock Valley Bible Church, we often have a recognition of these dates. On Palm Sunday, the kids will often carry palm branches into the auditorium as we all sing, "Hosanna in the Highest." On Good Friday, we have often have a church service on the Friday evening before Easter, remembering the circumstances surrounding the death of Jesus. Once in the history of our church, we gathered for an Ash Wednesday prayer meeting. I remember facing some difficult things as a church. The service was a time for us to pray over the difficulties we were facing.

Now, there are many other dates in the church calendar that we don't celebrate. We don't even make mention of them. I'm fine with that because nowhere in the Bible, even, are we commanded to celebrate any of these events at any particular times, even Christmas or Easter. These dates are simply human traditions that we find helpful. For us as a church, Christmas and Easter are the two primary dates on the liturgical calendar that we find helpful. Thus, we celebrate them.

So there is freedom in the church to do as led by the Lord. Some churches use their freedom to celebrate more dates than we do. **Epiphany** is one example. This day celebrates the day that the Magi came to visit Jesus, the day when Jesus was manifest to the Gentiles for the first time. This is celebrated the first Sunday in January (unless the Sunday is the first day of the month).

Another date on the liturgical calendar is **Pentecost Sunday**, which celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the church. This is celebrated on the 7th Sunday after Easter. It's sort of like the "Christmas" of the Holy Spirit, remembering the day that the Holy Spirit came to dwell among us.

Another date on the liturgical calendar is **All Saints' Day**, which is celebrated on November 1st every year. This day is set apart to remember the faithful ones who have gone before us. Hebrews 13:7 commands us to "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." But we are never commanded to do so on any particular day. Nor are we commanded how exactly to do this.

Now, pertinent to us this morning is Ascension Day, which comes 40 days after Easter. It always lands on a Thursday. It's the day when the world-wide church celebrates the Ascension of Jesus from this earth, exactly what our text describes today.

Now, as a church, to the best of my knowledge, in all of our 20 years of existence, we have never even mentioned "Ascension Day" before, not in a sermon, not in our weekly church-wide email. Yet, churches over the world celebrate this day every year. They celebrate Jesus ascending to heaven, as we will look at this morning. The title of my message this morning is "The Ascension." It comes from Acts 1:9-11

Now, before we actually read our text this morning, I want to give you an illustration.

<At this point in the message, I directed all of the congregation to go outside. It was a beautiful day. It took about 5 minutes to re-assemble in the lawn of the church. I asked one of the children to join me. I gave him a helium balloon and asked him to let it go. Naturally, everyone involved started watching the balloon drift away and out of site. As it rose into the sky, I tried to give our congregation a feel of what took place when Jesus rose up into the heavens by reading the following Scripture. I was encouraged afterwards by one man who told me that he really felt the experience of the disciples, as he was gazing at the balloon, not thinking about the topic of the sermon was the ascension.>

Acts 1:9-11

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And

while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

What an interesting story. Down through church history, this has come to be known as "The Ascension." Ascension simply means, "going up," or "moving to a higher level" or "rising to a more important position." This is what Jesus did. He ascended from his location on earth to his higher level in heaven. In fact, we know from Psalm 110, that Jesus ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father. This ascension was a part of an early church confession.

1 Timothy 3:16

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

This truth is also affirmed by all of Christendom. Are you familiar with the Apostle's Creed? It's the most basic doctrinal statement that unites all professing Christianity.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried, ...
he descended into Hades,
on the third day he rose again from the dead,
and is seated at the right hand of God, the Father, Almighty,
from whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead."

But as universal as this belief is, it is amazing how little attention we pay to it. In my 20 years of preaching at Rock Valley Bible Church, I don't recall ever preaching a message centered on the ascension. Yet, there are many places in the Bible that it is addressed. We will get to these in a bit. But let's first spend some moments on verses 9-11 to think about what actually happened.

We read in verse 9, "And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." The first point of my message is this, ...

1. Lifted Up (verse 9)

Because, that's what happened. Jesus was "lifted up." He was lifted up into a cloud. Now, when we set off our balloon, there was not a cloud in the sky. The balloon went higher and higher and higher, and further and further from us until we could see it no more! But not so with Jesus. There was a cloud in the sky. That "took him out of their sight."

I love the cases of the verse here. Jesus "was lifted up" is passive. A cloud "took him out of their sight." That's an active verb. In other words, Jesus was passive throughout this entire event. He didn't jump. He didn't flap his arms. He didn't propel himself up in any way. He was "lifted up." Something else (or someone else) acted upon him to levitate off the ground into the cloud. It's almost as if the cloud was on a divine mission to swallow him up.

From the gospel of Luke, we learn that Jesus did have his hands lifted up to bless the disciples (Luke 24:50). While he was blessing them, he was "carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:51). As Jesus was ascending, he went higher and higher and higher. He went 50 feet? 100 feet? 500 feet? We have no idea how high he went. But when he reached a certain height, this cloud came and took him out of their sight. They saw him no more. Literally, Jesus was taken "from their eyes." In fact, look at how often Luke emphasizes the fact that they saw this.

Acts 1:9-11

And when he had said these things, as they were **looking** on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their **sight**. And while they were **gazing** into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand **looking** into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you **saw** him go into heaven."

Five times in these three verses, we see Luke mentioning how the disciples saw Jesus with their own eyes. One commentator said, Luke wants us to know that "something objective took place."^[1] In other words, the ascension took place in time, space, and reality. It wasn't something that took place merely in the minds of the disciples. But it actually happened.

How was Jesus levitated into heaven? We don't know. It was a miracle. And the point of miracles is exactly this: they defy explanation. Now, because of the miraculous nature of the ascension, there have always been some doubters. Even today, people will argue against the reality of the ascension. But the disciples witnessed it (Acts 1:9); they talked about it (Acts 1:22); they preached about it (Acts 2:33); and they wrote about it (1 Peter 3:21).

Look at the end of chapter 1. The apostles were trying to figure out who could fill the role of Judas with the other 11 disciples. Peter gives a description of who might be able to fill the role, ..

Acts 1:21-22

So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when **he was taken up from us**—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.”

He talks about the ascension, as a key event in their lives with Jesus. He talks about beginning of the time when their lives intersected with Jesus. It was during the days of the ministry of John the Baptist. Some of the early disciples of Jesus were first disciples of John. Then, to mark the end of their lives with Jesus, Peter mentions the ascension, “when he was taken up from us.” In Peter’s mind, both of these events hold the same reality. As sure as John the Baptist was really immersing people in the Jordan river, equally sure was Jesus Christ lifted up into the cloud.

The ascension is no fringe doctrine. It’s not something that you can say that you don’t believe, if, indeed, you believe in Jesus. It is every bit important for you to believe as is the crucifixion and resurrection. It is central to Christian doctrine. Peter and the apostles believed it, because they saw it. Luke even believed it, because he was told of it. Remember, Luke is writing the book of Acts to Theophilus. He begins the book by mentioning the ascension.

Acts 1:1-2

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, **until the day when he was taken up**, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

Do you see the ascension? Just like Peter mentioned the ascension in Acts 1:22 as a time marker, so also Luke mentions the ascension in the same way. It formed a moment in time of the ministry of Jesus. It marked the end of his earthly ministry, which is where Luke ended the gospel of Luke. But our text doesn’t end with the ascension. It is where it begins. My second point takes us to Jesus after the ascension. We saw Jesus (1) "Lifted Up" in verse 9. Now, we see Jesus ...

2. Sitting Down

Now, if you notice, there is no verse reference after my point, because, Luke doesn’t talk about that here in our text. He goes on in verses 10 and 11 to talk about the second coming, which we will look at in my last point. But there is a large time gap between the ascension and the second coming, some 2,000 years so far.

The question is rightfully asked, “What is Jesus doing in this intermediate time?” The answer is clear. He is (2) "Sitting Down." He is sitting down at the right hand of God, the Father. This fact was proclaimed often by the apostles. They proclaimed the death of Jesus. They proclaimed the burial of Jesus. They proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus. They proclaimed the ascension of Jesus. They proclaimed where he is right now.

Look at the very first Christian sermon. It comes in Acts, chapter 2, on the day of Pentecost. I pick up reading in verse 32, just as Jesus is declaring the ascension.

Acts 2:32-34

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,
“The Lord said to my Lord,
‘Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

Here, we see Peter quoting from Psalm 110. His point is that Psalm 110 doesn’t apply to David! It doesn’t apply because David didn’t ascend into heaven (verse 34). David died and his tomb existed in Jerusalem (Acts 2:29). But Jesus did ascend into heaven. Peter could have said, in effect, “I saw him go up! Like a helium balloon, Jesus was lifted up and a cloud came and took him. Now, he is seated in the place of power, at the right hand of God. He is just waiting for the time when his enemies would be subdued.” That is where Jesus ascended to. He ascended to the right hand of God the Father, where he sat down.

In Acts, chapter 7, we get another glimpse of the ascension of Jesus. We read it in connection with the stoning of Stephen. He preached this powerful message of how the Jewish people have always resisted the man that God has sent to them, whether that was Joseph or Moses or the prophets. They have always rejected God’s ways. Stephen concluded his message by calling his listeners, “stiff-necked people” (verse 51). He told them how they always resisted the Holy Spirit (verse 51) and betrayed and murdered Jesus, the “Righteous One” (verse 52). As can be expected, the counsel was angry. Luke describes the scene.

Acts 7:54-60

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Of note here is the location of Jesus. He’s not on the earth anymore. He has ascended into heaven. He is at the right hand of God. Also of note here is that we see him standing at the right hand of God. It’s the only time in all the Bible that Jesus is seen standing at God’s right

hand. Why? I think it's because he is giving Stephen a standing ovation, applauding a job well done. He is receiving the first Christian martyr into his heavenly kingdom. Surely, Stephen heard those words that we all long to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23). I love the way that one man says it, "Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ, confessing his servant before God."^[2]

I believe that after receiving Stephen into his kingdom, Jesus sat right back down to wait for his enemies to be subdued. But who knows, maybe every time a believer enters into the heaven, Jesus stands to welcome them personally. Saying to everyone who has served the Lord faithfully, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23).

Now, Jesus isn't only sitting down, receiving people into heaven. Jesus is also praying. The book of Hebrews lays this out wonderfully for us. It puts forth Jesus as our great high priest, the one who intercedes for us to God. Consider these verses, ...

Hebrews 4:14-16

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The ascension comes in verse 14, which describes Jesus as "passing through the heavens." This takes Jesus past being taken by the cloud (Acts 1:9). It tracks Jesus continuing his travel into the heavens to ultimately arrive at the right hand of God, where he sat down. Thus, he becomes our "great high priest" (verse 14).

Since Jesus lived among us upon the earth, he can sympathize with us in our weaknesses (verse 15). Since he is seated at the right hand of God, the Father, he has access to the Father to plead for us. In 1 John 2:1, Jesus is called our "advocate." That is, our "defense attorney." He pleads our case before the Father. However, it's not so much that he pleads our case, as it is that he pleads his case. When we sin, Jesus goes before the Father and says, "Don't punish him, you already punished me upon the cross. There is no more punishment to give." When we sin again, Jesus pleads before the throne, saying to his Father, "I agree with you, that she deserves to die for her sin. But remember when I died upon the cross? It was for her sins that I died."

This is what Jesus does as he sits at the Father's right hand. He prays for us. He intercedes for us. Praying is the constant activity of Jesus as he sits in the heavens. [Jesus] "always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). And so, we can come to his throne through prayer anytime. We can seek mercy and grace at his throne because, verse 16 calls his throne, "A throne of grace." Grace and mercy flow from the throne of Jesus.

Jesus is at the Father's right hand for our benefit. "For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God **on our behalf**" (Hebrews 9:24). We sang it today, ...

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea
A great High Priest whose name is love
Who ever lives and pleads for me
...
When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin
Because the sinless Savior died
My sinful soul is counted free
For God the Just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me

It is no wonder, then, that in the book of Acts, as soon as we find Jesus leaving the disciples and taking his seat on the throne of grace, we find his disciples "devoting themselves to prayer." Look at Acts 1:14, "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer." Ah, ... but that's next week when we look at prayer in the book of Acts. We will be called to earnest prayer together. But today, it's the ascension.

So, let's get back to our text. We saw in verse 9, that Jesus was (1) Lifted Up. Then, we spent some time thinking his current activity. He is (2) Sitting Down, praying for us. In verses 10 and 11, we see the prophesy that Jesus will be ...

3. Coming Back (verses 10-11)

Acts 1:10-11

And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Now, I don't fault the disciples at all for gazing into heaven. Whenever a new and strange event takes place, we want to see what happened. We want to know how it's going to turn out. That's what these disciples were doing. They were straining to see exactly what happened to Jesus.

It's a bit like those who drive past an automobile accident. They slow down to look at what happened. In the Midwest, when traffic slows down because of this, we call it a "gapers' delay." Sometimes this is called "rubbernecking," as the drivers are swinging their necks around, straining for every last view. This is what the disciples were doing as they were gazing into heaven. They were trying to see what would

happen. Would Jesus re-appear? Would Jesus come back down? They didn't know what to think, until someone came to tell them what to think.

Luke describes those who came to interpret the event for them. Luke describes them in verse 10 as "two men ... in white robes." The white robes suggest strongly that these "men" were really angels. After the resurrection, both the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of John describe an angel or two coming to talk with those at the tomb, telling the women who showed up that Jesus had risen from the dead. Matthew describes this angel as having "clothing white as snow" (Matthew 28:3). John simply says that there were "two angels in white" (John 20:12).

So, we have reason to believe that these were angels, sent from God, with a message for the disciples. Their word put an end to all speculation. Jesus was gone. He wasn't coming back to walk and talk with them like he did before. Rather, his return will be a mighty return. He will return in all of his glory. Look again at what these angels said, ...

Acts 1:10-11

And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Now, I love the parallels between the ascension of Jesus and his return.

a. Jesus will return in the same way.

Jesus will come back in the same manner. He will come "on the clouds."

Matthew 24:29-31

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming **on the clouds** of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

These verses describe the day when Jesus appears in the heavens and coming back "with power and great glory." When he does so, he will come "on the clouds." Just as a cloud took him when being lifted up from the earth, so also will a cloud carry him on the way down.

b. Jesus will come back in the same place.

When you look at verse 12, you read that Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives is a Sabbath's Day journey (a mile or two) away from Jerusalem. It overlooks the city. Zechariah prophesied of the return of Christ, when he will take sovereign control over his kingdom. We read in Zechariah 14:4, ...

Zechariah 14:4

On that day **his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives** that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northward, and the other half southward.

Can you picture it? Jesus will stand someday on the Mount of Olives, with the ground splitting beneath his feet. The ground beneath his right foot will begin moving north. The ground between his left foot will begin moving south. Quickly, there shall be a very wide valley between north and south. That's where Jesus will return.

c. Jesus will come back with same surprise.

I believe that the disciples were shocked when Jesus ascended into the clouds. They weren't expecting Jesus to simply rise up into the heavens. Now, I don't believe that this came from Jesus not explaining to them what was doing or where he was going. In the Upper Room discourse (John 13-17), Jesus had told them that he was going away, so that he could send the Holy Spirit to them (John 16:7). He also told them to stay in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4), because the Holy Spirit would come upon them there (Acts 1:8). Logic would tell us that Jesus was leaving. Yet, I think the disciples were surprised when and how he left them. I don't think that they had much warning.

The coming back of Jesus will be much the same. When Jesus described his return, he described it as a thief in the night. He said it will be like it was in the days of Noah. When all were enjoying the pleasures of life, eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage, then the flood came and wiped them away. They were totally surprised at the coming destruction. Jesus said this, ...

Matthew 24:42-44

Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

The application for us is simply this: Be ready for his coming. Jesus left in the clouds. Jesus will return in the clouds. It will come with great surprise to many. Are you ready?

When Jesus comes back, he will come back as a Savior to those who believe and trust in him. He will also come back as a Judge to those who don't believe. We need to believe and be ready for his coming!

As I close, I simply want to mention how the points of my message this morning are like the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed reads, in part, "He ascended into heaven. He sits at the right hand of God, the Father, Almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead." We see Jesus (1) Lifted Up (verse 9). We see Jesus (2) Sitting Down. We see Jesus (3) Coming Back (verses 10-11). These are core truths that we need to hold.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 20, 2020 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] David Williams, p. 24 in Acts, New International Bible Commentary, quoted by Ajith Fernando, p. 72 in Acts, The NIV Application Commentary.

[2] Many across the internet have attributed this quote to F. F. Bruce. However, none of those who quoted him gave a reference. I looked and looked in his great commentary on Acts and couldn't find the quote. So, I'm not sure if F. F. Bruce is really the source of this quote.