

Sermon for May 21, 2023—“Gotta Go!”

Ascension of our Lord (observed), Year A—Texts: Acts 1:1-14; Luke 24:44-53

Why do heroes ride off into the sunset? Wouldn't it be better if they stayed? Who wants a hero who skips town as soon as the crisis is over? The hard stuff is what comes next. Sure, you beat up the big bad guy, but what about all the little ones? What about all the problems you didn't fix? What about the daily grind of living in a broken world?

Look at you on your cool horse, John Wayne: Who do you think is going to clean up all that poop it left behind? Forget the whole “riding off in the sunset” stuff, I want a hero who sticks around, not one who takes off. But isn't that exactly what Jesus did?

His people had waited thousands of years for him to come. And finally—the Messiah arrived. Then bam, he's gone. One minute he's there with the disciples, the next, our first reading tells us, “**He was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight.**” He ascended. He left. I can just picture the disciples standing there staring into the sky, like kids watching balloons float away. The Messiah rode off into the sunset.

So, what's this all about? Why wouldn't Jesus stick around? You'd think a few thousand years would be enough waiting already. Did he really need to take off and make us wait longer? That's like telling the kids on Christmas morning that they'll need to wait until New Year's to open their presents. That's just mean.

So—is it just me, or is something wrong here? Is it—maybe—how we're reading the story, or how we're hearing it? Maybe. This is why I'm willing to give God the benefit of the doubt here, and say that I really don't think that the Ascension is a mean trick that God's played on us. And it certainly isn't about Jesus leaving us just when we needed Him the most. As scripture tells it, the Ascension is **fundamental** to God's story.

Luke begins the book of Acts with the Ascension for a reason. Luke's story begins in his gospel, and ends with the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The Ascension story, which ends his Gospel and begins Acts—its sequel—is crucial. It's the critical hinge between the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the story of his Spirit-empowered people at work in the world. But why critical? Here's why—five things.

First thing—the King **rules**.

The Ascension is when Jesus establishes the Kingdom. He spends his entire life fulfilling God's Kingdom promises. But the Ascension is key. Something important happens. In his letter to the Ephesians (4:8), Paul writes that when Jesus “**...ascended on high, he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.**” And, arriving in heaven, he takes his rightful place at the Father's right hand. His rule has begun. The Kingdom is here! With Jesus' birth, the King arrives; with his life, death, and resurrection, the King redeems; with his Ascension, the King rules. If you stop short of the Ascension the story dies.

Second, the Priest **represents**.

Having returned to the Father, Jesus serves now and forever as our true High Priest. He becomes the perfect priest who cleansed the people from their sins, who will always represent them before the Father, who becomes our conduit to the Father. The Ascension breaks the cycle of God's people continually needing a new priest to offer a new sacrifice. With the Ascension, Jesus becomes our true priest forever. Our way—our only way—to the Father.

Third—the Spirit **comes**.

In an amazing statement in the Bible, in John's Gospel (16:7), Jesus tells His disciples, **“I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away.”** Now, I can think of several people who could make the world a better place just by leaving it. But Jesus? I'm sorry, but how can his leaving possibly be good for us?

Well, because that verse I just read is said in the context of Jesus promising to send the Holy Spirit. And? Well, right after he tells the disciples that it's to their advantage he go away, he tells them why. He says, **“if I do not go away the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”**

The Advocate is—of course—the Holy Spirit. So, Jesus' departure is good news because the Spirit is good news. So, having promised to send the Spirit once he was gone, that's exactly what Jesus did. Acts Chapter One—Jesus ascends. Acts Chapter Two—the Spirit descends. Good news. Actually—great news! We'll hear all about that next week on Pentecost.

Fourth—the People **serve**.

And so, we now ask an interesting question: Why did Jesus need to leave in order to send the Spirit? Couldn't the Spirit have come while he was still here? To be honest, I've no idea if God could've done things differently. Maybe. Probably. I mean, this is God we're talking about, right? So why does God do it like **this**?

In general—I try to avoid answering “Why did God _____?” questions. Because the truth is, we can't know, certainly not in this lifetime. But based on the way I read scripture I firmly believe that the reason Jesus ascended, and sent the Spirit was to empower God's people; empower us, so that we could do what we were always supposed to, and be who we were created to be—God's image-bearers in and to the world. Jesus could have continued doing that for us. He does it far better than we ever could.

But God's plan was never to carry out our role for us, or for Jesus to do our jobs for us. He wants **us** to do it. Besides, as he tells his disciples earlier in John's gospel (14:12): **“The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father.”** So, I wonder if the Ascension is about God creating space—space for his people to be his people, and carry out their calling in the world. I don't know. What do you all think?

Fifth—and finally—the Future **shines**.

I think the Ascension is a powerful reminder of our destiny. Here, it's important to remember that Jesus didn't stop being human when He ascended. It's not as though his humanity was a costume, something he put on at Christmas then hastily discarded at the Ascension. Quite the contrary. Jesus represents us as our High Priest forever. Specifically, because he remains one of us forever. So, the Ascension points to our destiny as humans ruling over God's creation here, and manifesting his glory everywhere.

And here, brothers and sisters, is the thing: As I see it, the Ascension isn't an optional add-on to the story. It's not something that we may, or may not choose to discuss if we've any time after we're done dealing with the more important stuff. The Ascension is critical. The Ascension is when the King rules. The Priest represents. The Spirit comes. The People serve. And the future shines with the brilliance of God's plan.

Jesus didn't just ride off into the sunset leaving us to clean up the mess that he'd left behind. No, Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, so that God's plans could be accomplished. Once we really and truly understand that we'll agree that Jesus had to go. But I have it on good authority that he's coming back. In the meantime, we have the Holy Spirit, and like the apostles did we have work to do.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.