

Luke 24:52

Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

It was in May 1977 that some college friends invited me to a birthday party

- I very much wanted to go to the birthday party not least because I very much liked the birthday-girl
- But I was rather concerned because the birthday party was at a Chinese restaurant
- I had never been to a Chinese restaurant but I knew that they ate a lot of rice
- And while it sounds silly now, the only rice I had eaten was in my mother's rice puddings
- And I did not like these at all – actually it was the milk and not that rice I didn't like
- But how do you describe the taste of Chinese food to someone who has never eaten it ... it's hard

Some years ago, one of my older members was in a residential home

- Sadly, her husband was taken into another nursing home and shortly after this he died
- The elderly lady had known me for some time but this was my first meeting with the rest of her family
- One of the things I knew was that her upstairs window overlooked the door to the home
- And that there was a strong possibility that family members would be looking out for my arrival
- When I arrived at the room, I began, 'And I'm not a bit like you thought I would be'
- And the younger members all agreed, though what they imagined I would be like, I don't know

How do you describe something that is unique, never seen before, you can say it is like something else

- But what about if it is not obviously like anything else that you have experienced before
- You can try to imagine it, but it might turn out to be nothing like what you imagined
- It is this challenge that faces us as we contemplate the ascension of the Lord Jesus
- An event outside of our experience that the evangelists must have found incredibly hard to express

In the Gospel, Luke simply records, 'he left them and was taken up into heaven' (Lk 24:51)

- While the more detailed account from Acts (1:9) says:
- 'He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight'
- There is little doubt that Luke intended his readers to believe that the Ascension actually happened
- Though that not need commit us to the idea that heaven is somewhere above the bright blue sky
- Rather it is a different dimension beyond time and space as we know them

One of the things I like to do when in London is to visit the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square

- Many of the works of the old masters depict various scenes from the Bible
- In about 1500 Estonian artist Michel Sittow painted the 'Ascension' as a devotional work
- While I suppose he might be commended for having a go – the overall effect is somewhat grotesque
- It is hard to imagine the Ascension but perhaps the best thing is not to try
- Instead to contemplate what the Ascension means more than to wonder about the mechanics of it

There are some clear reasons why the Ascension is important

- Simply disappearing would not have been a satisfactory way for the ministry of Jesus to end
- Going over the hill or sailing into the sunset might suggest his ministry was continuing somewhere else
- It needed to be clear that Jesus was returning to heaven rather than just disappearing
- His final appearing to his disciples and his bodily absence seem best expressed by going 'above'
- But why did the disciples return to Jerusalem with joy because Jesus had gone away into heaven

I THE ASCENSION CONFIRMED WHAT HE SAID ABOUT HIS IDENTITY

II THE ASCENSION CONFIRMED WHAT HE SAID ABOUT HIS MINISTRY

III THE ASCENSION CONFIRMED WHAT HE SAID ABOUT ETERNITY

I THE ASCENSION CONFIRMED WHAT HE SAID ABOUT HIS IDENTITY

The key question in the narratives about Jesus concerns his identity

- Each of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) has an account of the baptism of Jesus
- Luke records that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in bodily form like a dove.
- And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased” (Lk 3:22)
- Throughout Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is revealed as the herald-prophet of the kingdom of God
- But this reaches its climax at daybreak on the first Good Friday as Jesus was questioned
- by the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law
- “If you are the Christ”, they said, “tell us” – Jesus answered
- ‘From now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God’ (Lk 22:69)
- They all asked, “Are you then the Son of God?” He replied, “You are right in saying I am”

The resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ are two parts to his exaltation

- On the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter, summed up the message of Jesus in this way:
- You with the help of wicked men put him to death by nailing him to the cross
- But God raised him from the dead ... because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him
- Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33)

When Jesus entered into heaven all that he had said about his identity was vindicated

- Crucified as a blasphemer, his resurrection and ascension show he was whom he claimed to be
- The Samaritan woman at Sychar’s Well said to Jesus, “I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming”
- Jesus declared, “I who speak to you am he” (John 4:26) – the ascension sealed this claim with power

II THE ASCENSION CONFIRMED WHAT HE SAID ABOUT HIS MINISTRY

Most of us know the experience of saying ‘goodbye’ to family, friends and loved ones

- And there may be occasions when we realise that we are saying ‘goodbye’ for the last time
- Clearly something significant was happening as Jesus departed from the disciples to ascend to heaven
- And yet they returned to Jerusalem with great joy – this is often explained
- in terms of his local (bodily) presence being replaced by his universal (spiritual) presence
- but that does not convince me any more than it would have convinced the Apostle Paul who said
- ‘I desire to depart and be with Christ which is better by far’ (Phil. 1:23)
- Instead we should see the ascension as confirming what Jesus said about his ministry

At the heart of Mark’s Gospel (Mk 10:35-45) and the same can be said of Matthew (Matt 20:20-28)

- We find James and John asking to have a special status in the kingdom of heaven, and Jesus said:

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

(Mark 10:45)

The mission of Jesus was ‘*to give his life as a ransom for many*’

- From all that Jesus taught them, about the sacrifice of his death and the triumph of his resurrection
- His ascension confirmed that his self-offering on the cross was acceptable to God
- And that he now entered into the heavenly sanctuary or temple with his own blood to ransom us
- The ransom is not paid to a kidnapper but is used in the sense of compensation, to put wrong right

III THE ASCENSION CONFIRMED WHAT HE SAID ABOUT ETERNITY

The Gospel of Luke begins and ends in the temple at Jerusalem

- In the Old Testament, the temple was the meeting place between God and man
- For in the Holy of Holies (most holy place), God met the priest in the *shekinah* cloud of glory
- The ritual in the temple taught that no man could approach the presence of God without sacrifice
- In the Old Testament this was the blood of the day of atonement (Lev. 16), for the forgiveness of sins
- But in the New Testament we see Jesus enter the heavenly sanctuary with his own blood (Heb. 9:24)
- The day of atonement prefigures the crucifixion of Jesus but also prefigures his ascension
- At the crucifixion the temple curtain was torn from top to bottom (Luke 23:45)
- It is the most vivid reminder that the sacrifice of blood and of priests was concluded
- For Jesus, by the offering of his own blood, had fulfilled everything that the temple ritual prefigured
- And Jesus, our great high priest, has entered not an earthly sanctuary but a heavenly sanctuary
- After the cross of Jesus there is no need for sacrificing priests or altars for his work is complete

The ascension inaugurates the heavenly session of Christ, as we consider what Jesus is doing now

- We are reminded that he is praying and preparing for his people – as he said to his disciples
- I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you
- I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am (John 14:3)

Thomas said to him, “Lord we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

(John 14:6)

In this 'I am' saying, Jesus affirms that he is the way to the Father because his death has made access possible

- Before this, access to the Father's presence was limited to the high priest on one day
- But now access to the Father is opened through Jesus Christ – and the ascension confirms this

On the night before he died, in conversation with his disciples, Jesus offered an eternal promise

- In my Father's house are many rooms
- I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you
- I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am (John 14:3)
- Worldly materialism and a culture that values pleasure above all else has lost the eternal dimension
- But the death of Jesus should bring us face-to-face with our own mortality
- And cause us to ask ourselves the question, 'what about eternity?'

When Jesus said that no one came to the Father but by him – 'coming to the Father' meant entering heaven

- 'but by him' meant only through faith in him
- And the basis of faith in Jesus Christ is to believe what he said about his identity
- That he is the Christ, the Son of the living God
- And to believe what he said about his ministry
- That he came to give his life as a ransom for many
- And to believe what he said about eternity
- That he is uniquely the way to the Father's house, the Kingdom of Heaven, confirmed by the ascension

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