

# Why Celebrate the Ascension?

## Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53, May 28, 2017

“I’ve lost control!” Have you ever said that? “I’ve lost control of my life!”

This is what we say when we are confronted with circumstances in our lives that are beyond our control!” But’s it not *really* TRUE that we lose control of our lives, but what we lose the ILLUSION that we were ever in control of our lives in the first place; a hard lesson to learn. We human beings have built in limitations! We can’t fly no matter how hard we flap our arms and imitate the birds! We can’t live on this earth in our present physical state forever; no matter how disciplined we are in our diets and how faithfully we exercise!

There are things that do happen to us that are definitely beyond our control: Take for example that horrendous terrorists’ attack that took place in Manchester, England this past Tuesday. Thousands of people were gathered in a fine arts building--to enjoy a concert of music; when all of a sudden a bomb detonates and 22 innocent people are killed; 59 others are injured. A short time later, ISIS proudly announces to the world – that they are responsible for what has taken place.

Just as quickly as that a tornado may strike or a hurricane may find its way across the ocean to where we live. The economy can collapse. People may be involved in an automobile accident; heart disease and cancer may strike.

**BUT PERHAPS THE MOST FRIGHTENING POSSIBILITY FOR US AS HUMAN BEINGS IS THAT OF BEING LEFT ALONE; TOTALLY ALONE IN THIS WORLD.**

The first thing God saw that was not good at Creation’s dawn in his perfect world was that the man should not be alone. The Creator said: “It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make a helpmeet suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18)!

This fear being left alone is a fear that we are born with that never totally escapes us! Babies and small children fear abandonment from their mothers. Teenagers fear abandonment from their fellow classmates, so that they too often end up caving into peer pressure. Married people fear abandonment by a spouse. And elderly people may fear being left alone in a nursing home to die!

And didn’t Jesus—who said to his disciples one day: “My Father is always with me” (John 8:29), experience the ultimate abandonment when he took our place under the law of God, dying for our sins upon the cross; when he was, for a time, completely abandoned by his Heavenly Father on the cross; crying out in fulfillment of Psalm 22—“*My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me*” (Matthew 27:46)!

In our First Lesson (Acts 1) and our Gospel Lesson (Luke 24), St Luke tells us that forty days after our crucified and risen Savior rose victorious over sin, death and the grave that first Easter morning, he took his disciples with him out to the Mount of Olives where he ascended to the Father’s right hand! During 40 those days—the Risen Christ made numerous appearances to his disciples to convince him that yes, he really was alive in his glorified body that it was still a physical body!

He convinced them of this when he said to them: *“See my hands and my feet; that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”* And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, *“Have you anything here to eat? They gave him a piece of broiled fish and he took it and ate before them”* (Luke 24:39-42)!

Forty days following that first Easter morning, the Bible tells us that he ascended into heaven! But the strangest part of the whole equation: The Risen Christ told his first followers that this was to their advantage and to ours—so that he could become present everywhere—all throughout the world—in his divine nature and in his human nature—through the gift of the Holy Spirit!

Jesus foretold all of this on the night before he died, when he said: *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another HELPER, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him! YOU KNOW HIM, FOR HE DWELLS WITH YOU AND WILL BE IN YOU!*

*I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU AS ORPHANS, FOR I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live you will live also! In that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me, and I in you”* (John 14:15-21)! The fullest realization of all these things did not become crystal clear to Jesus’ first disciples until the DAY OF PENTECOST—THAT WE WILL CELEBRATE NEXT SUNDAY!

YOU SEE, IT WAS NOT ENOUGH THAT THROUGH CHRIST GOD WAS BORN INTO OUR WORLD AS ONE OF US—ALTHOUGH THAT WAS THEN AND STILL REMAINS FOR US TODAY—OUR GREAT CHRISTMAS PRESENT EVER! HIS ASCENSION GIFT—WAS THAT THROUGH CHRIST—WE COULD BECOME BORN INTO GOD—AS THOSE WHO WOULD BECOME THE POSSESSORS OF HIS VERY SPIRIT.

By Jesus’ presenting his own scarred, yet Risen Body, to be seated at the right hand of God, means that Jesus as the Holy Son of God imported our flesh and blood into those holy precincts for the first time. Jesus paved the way for us, so that when we arrive there later, everyone will not be quite so shocked by us. By Jesus putting on our flesh and blood—and keeping them on—Jesus has not only brought God to us; he has also brought us to God! Jesus knows that our greatest human fear is to be left all alone. Jesus not only knows it, he experienced it and he has conquered it. At his Ascension, Jesus announces the end of alone-ness. Jesus promises at his Ascension that his disciples will receive the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). And then he ascends and it would seem to us initially that Jesus is leaving them, going away and yet—what do these disciples do? Probably the last thing that any of us would ever have expected!

What do these disciples do? They rejoice! Even though Jesus has left them they are not afraid of being left alone. Does this make sense? Remember what the disciples all did after the crucifixion? They all ran away and hid. Eventually they all got together because they thought, “Hey, at least we have one another.” But they were all scared and disappointed. They thought it was over and they had been left alone, abandoned by Jesus.

Now, at the Ascension, they realize that even though Jesus ascends to the Father, the gift of the Holy Spirit will provide them with the power and the presence they need to survive the moment, whatever that moment may be or come to them in their lives. They would understand all of this to a much greater degree on that first Day of Pentecost---but already they were

beginning to understand for themselves what God wants us to recognize for ourselves: *“We are more than conquerors through him who loved us! For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:37-39)!*

Luke ends his Gospel by telling us that the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy and we know that that was true! But being honest with ourselves, let’s also remember that it had just happened for them, that they had just been with him and their memory of him and his ascending into heaven was still very, very fresh in their minds. They were still running on adrenaline! Almost every church with stained-glass windows has one ascension window tucked away—somewhere.

In our picture, Christ is hovering in the air, his hands upraised in blessing, while the disciples look up at him with something between awe and delight! But he is there with them! He is in the window! And since they went away joyful then I cannot help thinking—that it was because they thought he would be back in a day or two, next week at the latest!

I have come to believe that for us now, two thousand years later, we often tend to see the whole thing differently! Maybe we really need is a new window to describe our human situation and the way we feel at times—a window with just us in it—no angels, no Jesus, no heavenly light—just us, still waiting, still watching the sky, our faces turned up like empty cups that only one presence can fill. Jesus is not present anymore with us, not in the way that he used to be with his first disciples.

Nevertheless, we are here today—because Christ’s promises were fulfilled to his first disciples. The Holy Spirit was poured out upon them. And through their bold preaching of the Gospel, many people did come to faith! And we too sense the real presence of Christ among us through the faith he has given us in the Gospel!

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The story of the Ascension of Jesus Christ is a wonderful piece of history, but what relevance does it have for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? May I answer my own question by telling you a story?

My story is about a Christian man who woke from his sleep every day and prayed the same prayer, morning after morning: “Lord, if you want me to witness to someone today, please give me a sign to show me who it is!”

One day he found himself on a bus when a big, burly man sat next to him. The timid Christian anxiously waited for his stop so he could exit the bus. The bus was nearly empty but this guy sat next to the Christian. But before he could get very nervous about the man seated next to him, the big guy burst into tears and began to weep. He then cried out with a loud voice, “I need to be saved! I’m a lost sinner and I need the Lord! Won’t somebody tell me how to be saved?”

He turned to the Christian and pleaded, “Can you show me how to be saved?” The believer immediately bowed his head and prayed: “Lord, is this a sign?”

The relevance of the Ascension of Jesus is simply this: He has now departed this earth and has left us to get on with the business of telling others the Gospel. Our Gospel reading for the ascension focuses on Jesus and his great commission to his disciples to preach the good news and we see very similar words to these in Acts 1: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth!"

Why is this so important? Well how many of us would be here today if Peter had gone off fishing and Mary had gone back to housework and Matthew to tax-collecting...and all their fellow disciples had become way too busy to tell others about Christ?

Brothers and sisters, we need to tell others that Jesus' death on the cross wasn't just an unfortunate circumstance that came upon him, the way that the attenders in that concert in Manchester became random victims of that detonated bomb. Jesus' death upon the cross was the plan of God, even long before the day when sin entered the world!

So please let me tell you now just one more story! Mayor Richard Dailey was the Mayor of Chicago for 21 years, from 1955 to 1976. He was known as a rather forbidding guy to work for! One day one of Mayor Daly's speech writers approached the May about the possibility of his receiving a raise, after all he had worked for Mayor Daly for three years, without having received even one raise!

The Mayor said, "I am not going to give you a raise! You are getting paid more than enough already. It should be enough for you that you are working for a great American hero like me! And that was the end of it...or so the mayor thought!

Two weeks later, Mayor Dale was on his way to give a speech to a convention of American veterans. The speech was going to receive national attention. Noe one other thing Mayor Daly was famous for was not reading his speeches until he got up to deliver them. So there he stood before a vast throng of veterans and before television cameras that were going to relay the speech to the American people all throughout our nation!

So Mayor Daly began to describe the plight of veterans. He said to his audience: "I have a heart for you; I am concerned about you. I am deeply convinced that this country needs to take care of its veterans. So today I am proposing a seventeen-point plan that includes the city, the state and federal government to care for the veterans of this country!

Now by this time everyone, including Mayor Daly was on the edge of their seats to hear what the proposal was! He turned the page and saw only these words: "You are on your own now—you great American hero!"

Jesus, in contrast, gave his Holy Spirit so we should never be alone! Jesus promises that God will never drop you in it.

*"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the say way as you saw him go into heaven?"*

So where is this wonderful commodity that we would endeavor to receive so much—this love of Jesus—that will not let us go, to be found? It is to be found right here in the hearts of God's people!

Let us make it our prayer this morning to spend time in prayer with him and to look for opportunities to share our faith with those who do not know him. May I leave you with some words of St. Paul this morning: "So then my friends, because of God's great mercy to us; offer yourselves as living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship you should offer him" (Romans 12:1)! Amen