

## Acts 1:3-11

### Ascension 5 May 2016

After he had suffered, he had shown himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during a period of 40 days and telling them about the kingdom of God.

While he was meeting with them, he ordered them, "Don't leave Jerusalem. Instead, wait for what the Father has promised, about which you heard me speak. For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit a few days from now."

Now those who had gathered together began to ask Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He answered them, "It is not for you to know what times or periods the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After saying this, Jesus was taken up while those who had gathered together were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, two men in white robes stood right beside them. They asked, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you saw him go up into heaven."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. (ISV)

Prayer: we come to you, o Lord, with hunger minds and trust that your Spirit will feed us through the Word and the preaching of your humble servant.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

We are looking at the greatest events and maybe the least appreciated occurrence of Jesus Christ. We jubilee at Christmas, we meditate about Good Friday, we marvel at Easter and look forward to the second coming of Christ, but when it comes to Ascension we hesitate. And maybe it is because somebody is going away – Ascension marks the departure of Jesus' physical presence. He will be with his disciples always until the end of the world but it is different. Jesus is leaving. And somehow it seems inappropriate to get too excited when someone is going away.

As everybody who departs knows, that even if you know that a "good bye" is coming, it remains difficult when the moment of departure has arrived. People say "fair well" in different way – some do it well-mannered and shake hands, some cry and hug ... I remember when we left after our studies in Germany, our hearts were very heavy; I wept in the plane back to SA because it will never be the same again.

But in Luke 24 we read that the disciples left the mountain and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. With great joy!

If we, while returning from Germany to South Africa, would hear later, that all our friends back in Germany would through a party because we have left – that would have been very strange. So what caused this remarkable sentence of Luke that the disciples returned with great joy?

Before we come to the three main reasons that I will offer as explanation, let's just follow the story again. After the resurrection, we read that Jesus had shown himself to various people for 40 days. Around 9 or 10 of these appearances have been recorded in the New Testament. It seems to be that the resurrection should be established beyond any reasonable doubt. So Christ appeared repeatedly personally and in physical reality. But then after the ascension, it stopped. It was not necessary any more for Jesus to prove his resurrection; the disciples got it.

Luke mentions another reason why Christ appeared for another 40 days, and that is that Jesus spoke to them about the Kingdom of God. It seems to be that Jesus prepared the disciples for the work of the Kingdom which lay ahead of them. And it is obvious that during this time of teaching, the disciples were nurtured at a new level of understanding that they did not had before. Previously they thought of the cross as an unwittingly disaster, now they saw that it happened exactly as God had planned it to be. They got an overview of the old and the new dispensation that God had put in place. Old Testament and New Testament suddenly fitted together within God's universal plan of salvation.

And it is interesting to note that Christ was not with them constantly throughout the 40 days. He appeared, taught and disappeared. In other words, He is wheeling them away; He is gradually withdrawing from their dependence on his physical presence. For 3 years they had the privilege to engage personally, they witness miracles and saw Him

directly; then Jesus gradually retreats during this transitional time of 40 days, until this day when they see Him leaving. Previously their faith was based on seeing, but now they have come to the point that they trust in Him without seeing Him. Now, Jesus goes with his disciples up mount olives. Where He previously went down from mount olives to Jerusalem, He now goes up. Luke emphasis that the disciples saw Him go! This is the point, where they were ready to go – into the world and carry on with the work of the Kingdom. And we read, they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Now what was it that filled them with gladness?

I want suggest three things: (1) the cloud, (2) the blessing and (3) the promise.

(1)

After saying this, Jesus was taken up while those who had gathered together were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

What is the significant about this cloud in Luke's report? Are we given information about the weather conditions at that time? Not a change. The Bible is one story and God ties the events together in the most astonishing way. Remember that God is invisible; nobody has ever seen God. Yet God wants to make his presence known to his people. So, throughout the history God gave certain visible symbols of his presence. For example when the Israelites we journeying from Egypt to the Promised Land, there was a pillar of fire during the night and a cloud during the day. Another example when king Salomon build the temple and it was inaugurated, and king Salomon prayed, the temple was filled with a cloud – as a visible assurance that what was happening was most pleasing to God. When Christ went up the mountain and He was transfigured and Elijah and Moses appeared with Him – a cloud came up the mountain. And the disciples that were present, fell to their knees because they knew that they were in the immediate presence of God. So there are many other occasions that the presence of invisible God was manifested by a visible cloud.

Now at ascension was taken up – not simply into the sky, but into the cloud. Literally it reads: Jesus was taken up, and a cloud received Him. Now, can anything be clearer than this. The Lord Jesus came from the Father who sends his Son into the world, and now Jesus is returning to the Father. And having finished his redemptive work, He is received by the Father – represented by the cloud. Note the passive form: the ascension was the initiative of the Father: Jesus was taken by the Father, out of this world into his presence.

Now I want you to imagine the entrance of Jesus into the glory of God. This is the first time since Adam was expelled from the Garden of Eden, that a man (human) is entering the heavenly gates. Can you see how the angels erupts in jubilee and praise? The first Adam led us all out of the immediate presence of God, he caused us to sin – but the second Adam leads us all in. Now we understand that the disciples were filled with joy: their Lord is taken up directly into heaven. He is the first one. And because He is there, his people and all who are connected with Christ will follow soon. Our place in heaven is prepared, dear fellow Christians. It is only a matter of time that we will follow where our heavenly Lord already sits at the right hand of God.

May I add another reason for joy? It is far more beneficial for us that Jesus is in heaven than on earth. Suppose that you have been locked up in prison for a crime that goes along with the death penalty. And someone sends a lawyer to us. This man is not only a reasonable, clever attorney but also a very compassionate and understanding friend. You can tell him everything that burden you and you feel that he understand you completely. You will find comfort in his presence but it will not be good if he stays with you in prison. It is much better that he will defend you in court; he must leave you and defend your case before the judge. That is where you need the attorney most, because as comforting as it is to have him in prison, at the end of the day, if he cannot defend you, your case is lost.

My greatest need as a sinner is not necessary comfort on earth but an advocate in the court of heaven that will plead my case before the heavenly Judge. And when Jesus into heaven, He went right to the place where I most need Him to be. What does it of help that we go through the world with ease and comfort but when we reach death and departure, we have no one to welcome us? Jesus pleads our case day-by-day before almighty God, for we have sinned daily and are forgiven every time that we call unto his Name. I plead guilty to every charge the devil brings up against me, but I have a full pardoned signed in God's own hand, purchase by the blood of Jesus.

The disciples knew that Jesus takes up his rightful position in heaven, so that they are free on earth. And this is what they preached all over the world.

(2)

**The Blessings.** Now, last impressions last the longest – everybody who lost a loved one, remembers the last words or retains the last image of that person. What was the last impression that the disciples had from Jesus before He returned into heaven?

**Luk 24:50f** Later, Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, lifted up his hands, and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven.

Try and picture yourself amongst the disciples standing there and watching Jesus: He lift up his hands and blesses them. Remember the significance of blessing in the Old Testament – for example when Jacob robed Esau for the blessing of his father Isaac. The blessing was not a mumbling of some religious words, but a prophetic statement of what God would do in and through a person's life. Isaac was not able to retract his blessing nor to repeat it – it has been spoken over Jacob, and that's it. Which meant that Jacob was now in that line through which God will unfold his plan. And the same care was given by Jacob when he blessed his 12 sons, as his anointing will unfold in history until this day. And now Christ raised his hands and blessed them and while He is blessing them, He is taken up, and He is still blessing. That is the last image that the disciples had from Jesus that is his "unfinished" work; He is continuing blessing them as He ascending.

Can you see that this ascension-festival speaks of God's completed work in Jesus – his redemptive work on the cross – nothing needs to be added to it, it is finished, heavens' doors are opened? And this festival speaks of God incomplete work – He continues blessing us and one day He will receive us in his heavenly glory. Blessing will continue until He returns.

So the disciples go back to Jerusalem with great joy because they know that Jesus is received by the Father, Jesus is at the right place as attorney, has prepared a home for them, and He is continuously blessing them from heaven.

(3)

**The promise** comes in two parts: Don't leave Jerusalem. Instead, wait for what the Father has promised, about which you heard me speak. For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit a few days from now.

Christ is ascending into heaven, but now his presence will be made possible by the Holy Spirit. His presence is not visible, but it is a real reality. And this is the great advantage that the church has. As Jesus is in heaven, we ask: where is heaven? And the answer is: all around us, wherever God is, there is Jesus. He can be present everywhere at all times. That was not possible when Jesus was physical on earth. People had to come to Him, and Jesus could only be in one village at one time.

But now Jesus tells his disciples that they will be witnesses in Jerusalem, in Samaria until the end of the earth. Christians will be scattered all over the planet. And hence Jesus says: it is for your own good that I go, because unless I go, I cannot send the Holy Spirit.

So as Christ ascends, the disciples know, everybody that is connected with Jesus will receive the same Spirit with which Jesus was filled.

And finally the second part of the promise is the second coming of Christ. Two heavenly beings (angels) became visible and told the disciples: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you saw him go up into heaven."

This final promise is repeated in the New Testament on numerous occasions. Especially the book of Revelation depicts Christ coming in the same vocabulary as a Roman procession enters through the gates of Rome. We could maybe describe it in terms of the opening celebration of the Olympic Games with all imaginable flair, music, performances and then at last the entrance of the athletes in the stadium. With the difference of cause, that our battle will not lay before us, but we will enter heaven as victors. The roman army, it is said, after winning a major battle, will wait outside the city of Rome. And anybody was welcome to join them. And finally when the procession starts, others may enter into the streets of Rome together with the victorious army.

There is still a glorious future awaiting us, like Jesus said in connection with the end of times **Luk 21:27** Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your deliverance is approaching."

Now at ascension they understood – Jesus is at the right place.

It might be that you and I will still have to face difficulties and agony while we're on the way. But from this service you may leave and return to your homes and your work **with great joy**, knowing that you are able and enabled to go forth because Jesus opened the way for you and me. He is at the right place – and that is every place where you are. He pleads for you and me before the Father; He continuously bless us from heaven, and He will return to take us with Him in the cloud in God's presence. Amen.

May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.  
Amen. (Pastor Klaus Damaske)