

If you made a list of the top 3 special Christian days, Christian holy days, days we celebrate and remember, what days would you include and in what order? I think most of us would have Christmas and Easter at the top of the list. Some of you would put Christmas at the top of the list; others would say Easter. But what day would come in at number 3?

Some of you grew up or spent years in churches that observed the liturgical year which was filled with significant holy days you observed throughout the year. Besides Christmas and Easter there was Pentecost, and Epiphany, Good Friday, and Palm Sunday. You may have celebrated All Saints Day, Ash Wednesday, or Maundy Thursday.

But even among churches that follow the Christian calendar and celebrate all these special days, there is one day that hardly gets any attention. And that is Ascension Day. Ascension Day is, of course, the day that commemorates the ascension of Jesus. According to Acts 1, 40 days after His resurrection, Jesus left this earth in the presence of His disciples and returned to His rightful place in heaven.

I grew up in the independent Christian churches which almost completely ignore the liturgical year except for Christmas and Easter. Although we have added two holy days to the calendar—the fellowship dinner and opening weekend of deer season. So to educate myself, I did some reading this week and even went to a website called “The Liturgical Year for Dummies” and Ascension Day doesn’t even get a shout out.

We’re not going to become high church and start following the liturgical calendar, but we do want to look at the ascension of Jesus this morning. His return to heaven is one of the most essential teachings about Jesus, even if it is often overlooked. When you leave this morning, you will know why the ascension is so important.

Luke certainly thought it was important, because he records it twice. The first time is at the end of his gospel in Luke 24. And then he gives a more detailed account here in the first chapter of Acts. Our Core Verse is verse 9, but I want to go ahead and read 10 and 11 as well. This happens immediately following our Core Verse from last week where Jesus promises the disciples the Holy Spirit and calls them to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth.

⁹ (2 Slides) *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. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ 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.”*

Consider this— If Jesus had merely wanted to return to the Father, He simply could have vanished. Once His work here was done, He could have just disappeared from this physical realm and gone home. However, Jesus chose to depart in a highly visible and very visual way—a way which held great meaning for those who were eyewitnesses. Rising up in the clouds and

disappearing in the distance sent a powerful message to the disciples, and it tells us several important things as well.

I. It is proof Jesus truly came from Heaven

First of all, it offers proof Jesus really came from heaven. Throughout his ministry, Jesus offered many proofs that He was the divine Son of God. There was the authority of His teaching. There was the power of his miracles. There was the fact that demons dared not oppose Him.

But just in case there was any doubt Jesus goes through this show of visibly returning to heaven. Remember the disciples did not share the same scientific knowledge about the structure of the solar system and the nature of the cosmos that we have. Their perception of reality was that heaven is up there, and earth is down here.

We know that heaven is not up there above the clouds, even though we still use that terminology. We understand these are two different realms of existence, but when Jesus goes through this display of rising in the clouds and going up toward what they thought was heaven, He was telling them something. Jesus was saying, "I came from heaven, and now I am returning to heaven."

In John 3:13, Jesus says, "*No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.*" Now he is putting that teaching on display. Here is proof I came from heaven.

II. It is evidence Jesus physically rose from the dead

Number two. It is evidence Jesus physically rose from the dead. There are skeptics and those with wishy washy theology who say that Jesus' resurrection was only metaphorical. Jesus was risen in the hearts and minds of His followers, or that it was just a spiritual resurrection.

That would mean that over the last 40 days all these people had been witnessing some sort of ethereal apparition, and not the physical presence of a risen Lord. But Luke demonstrates in this story that something objective and physical happened when Jesus ascended. If you go back to the 3 verses of our passage, notice how many times Luke draws attention to what the disciples see. "*As they were looking on...out of their sight...while they were gazing...looking into heaven...saw him go.*"

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This is what they actually saw. This wasn't their imagination. They didn't make it up. Keep in mind Luke was a doctor by trade. He is a trained observer, a master of diagnosis. He understands the importance of observing the evidence and drawing proper conclusions. In fact, in his introduction to his gospel he points out that his story is based on eyewitness accounts. The disciples were eyewitnesses to Jesus ascending to heaven.

III. It declares Jesus now reigns victorious

Thirdly, the ascension declares Jesus now reigns victorious. One of the key elements of this story is that Jesus was taken up in a cloud. We have no idea what this cloud looked like, but let me show you a couple of pictures to get you in the right frame of mind. (Show 3 cloud pictures)

Even though we know what clouds are and how they work, but we are still filled with wonder at impressive clouds. Imagine what it felt like for the disciples to see cloud come down and take Jesus up with it. Ancient cultures saw clouds as chariots of the gods. Biblical poetry builds on this imagery to convey the power of God.

Jeremiah 4:13 says, *"Behold, he comes up like clouds; his chariots like the whirlwind."*

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David likewise used cloud imagery to glorify the power of God. In 2 Samuel he sings a song of deliverance which includes this stanza.

He rode on a cherub and flew;
 he was seen on the wings of the wind.
 12 He made darkness around him his canopy,
 thick clouds, a gathering of water.
 13 Out of the brightness before him
 coals of fire flamed forth.
 14 The Lord thundered from heaven,
 and the Most High uttered his voice.

Think of how many times in the Bible the power of God was connected with clouds. When the law was given at Mt. Sinai, the mountain was enshrouded in clouds. God led the people through the wilderness with a cloud by day. When both the tabernacle and temple were completed God's glory filled the sanctuary in a cloud.

Now think again about the cloud that took Jesus. Jesus did not leave this earth the same way He arrived. He came as a helpless baby. He arrived as a holy infant so tender and mild as lyrics of "Silent Night" go. But He did not leave that way! He left in power! He left in glory! He left victorious!

He came to earth in weakness but returned to heaven in power. That Jesus currently sits on the throne in heaven and reigns in power is something that the New Testament writers testify to again and again.

In Acts 2:33 Peter declares that Jesus has been "exalted at the right hand of the God." Peter draws attention to this fact several more times in the few chapters of Acts.

In Acts 7:55 Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit gazes into heaven and sees Jesus at the right hand of God.

Ephesians 1:19-21 says, "...according to the working of [God's] great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion."

Philippians 2:9 says, "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name."

Hebrews 8:1 says Jesus "is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven."

Undoubtedly, the writers of the New Testament saw the ascension of Jesus to heaven as a most crucial proof of his power and glory.

IV. It shows we now have an advocate in heaven

Number Four. It shows we now have an advocate in heaven. Jesus is in heaven interceding for us. The Bible uses two images to communicate this. The first is an advocate. This is a legal term. Think of a defense attorney. That was an advocate.

John writes in 1 John 2:1, *"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."*

If you blow it, it's okay, because you've got Jesus in heaven defending your case. Jesus is your high dollar, high powered attorney in heaven representing you.

The other image is of Jesus as our great high priest— someone who acts as our go between before God who offers sacrifice for our sins.

Hebrews 4:14 says, *"We have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God."* This verse directly ties Jesus ascension to His being our high priest.

Later, in Hebrews 7:24-25 it says, *"Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."*

In Jesus we not only have a friend in high places. We have a friend in the highest place. An advocate not limited by space and time.

V. It gives us confidence that Jesus will return again.

Five. It gives us confidence that Jesus will return again. If he left that way, He can come back that way. This is the point that the angels make to the disciples in our Scripture. They're still their gawking into the sky long after Jesus has disappeared.

"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." It's like they're saying. Don't worry. He's coming back.

VI. It assures us Jesus truly is preparing a place for us

That leads right into the next thing we can learn from the ascension, and that is we can rest assured that He is truly preparing a place for us. One of the reasons Jesus left was to get ready for our arrival. He sent the Holy Spirit to prepare us for heaven, and Jesus left to prepare heaven for us.

In John 14:1-3 Jesus gives us this promise,

"¹ Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

VII. Our focus is to be on earth right now.

One final lesson to be learned from Jesus' ascension is this— It reminds us our focus is to be on earth right now. Luke begins his second book right where his first one leaves off. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' work on earth ends with His ascension in chapter 24. In Acts, the work of the church on earth begins with Jesus ascending into heaven in chapter 1 and pouring out His Spirit on the church in chapter 2.

There is a temptation to be like the disciples looking to heaven and awaiting the return of Jesus. We've got work to do while we wait for Jesus to return. One of the implications of the angels message for the disciples and for us is this – quit waiting and start working. You've got a job to do. Start doing it.

Titus 2:12-13 "Live self-controlled upright and godly lives in this present age while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

But the fact that Jesus has returned to heaven, the knowledge that he currently reigns in power, that even now He is preparing a place for us, the assurance that one day He will return for us, gives us the motivation we need to do what our Savior has called us to do.

Tim Keller says, "The ascension, when understood, becomes an irreplaceable, important resource for living our lives in the world—and it's a resource no other religion or philosophy of life holds out to us."

No other faith serves a risen and reigning Savior. Only Jesus.

And what is it that Jesus has called us to do. Three things: the great commandment, the great commission, and the great connection. The Great commandment – These are the two greatest purposes we have on earth. Mark 12:29-31 Love God and Love people. Great commission – This is our mission. Matthew 28:19-20 – Go into all the world teaching and baptizing them. The Great Connection – This is the fellowship that binds us together. John 13:34-35 Love one another just as Jesus loved us.

The exaltation of Jesus in heaven is just as important as his humiliation on earth. Through his suffering Jesus identified with our sin and became death for us. Through his ascension Jesus secures for us his glory so that He can share it with us. It wasn't enough for our Savior to come from heaven to earth, but to complete His work, He had to go from earth to heaven. Knowing that He did, gives us the assurance we will one day follow.