

076: Where Is Jesus?

Andrew Kneeland, May 16, 2021

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Happy Ascension Sunday! This is the week we remember when Jesus ascended into heaven. It's often a forgotten part of Jesus' life, isn't it? We know all about the birth of Jesus, we hear about the life of Jesus, his death and his resurrection... but the Ascension was important too! And is such a blessing for us!

How can Jesus *leaving* be a good thing? How can that be a blessing?

Well, the Ascension was exactly what needed to happen. It's what the disciples needed to have happen, and it's what we need to have happened. We NEEDED Jesus to ascend... but He hasn't left.

We're going to look at these verses in Luke 24 today. This was an emotional time for the disciples. Try to imagine yourself in their position. Their teacher and friend had just been unjustly executed and suddenly rose from the dead. They go through a range of emotions in these verses in Luke, and Jesus has the perfect response for each of them. It's also an emotional time for us, isn't it? A lot is going on in the world around us, and I think a lot of us would agree that a lot of it doesn't seem to be going right. But Jesus has the perfect answer for each of us, too.

So today we're going to look at the Ascension -- and ask the question "Where is Jesus?" Let's pray together as we begin this morning:

*Father God, we thank you for your Word to us. We praise you for being our resurrected and ascended Savior. Help us to better understand what that means for us today and guide us into your truth. In your name we pray, amen.*

**The first emotion the disciples process is FEAR.** They were all gathered together in a small room, listening to two disciples tell them that they had seen the resurrected Jesus, when all of a sudden Jesus Himself was standing with them! I think fear is an appropriate and natural reaction!

There was a lot of misunderstanding about spirits and death back two thousand years ago. Many people thought that the spirits of people who had died roamed around on the earth, so

many people were afraid of ghosts. Remember how the disciples were afraid of Jesus walking on the water? They thought he was a ghost!

They thought the same thing here in Luke 24. But Jesus puts their fears to flight. He doesn't condemn them for being afraid, he doesn't shake his head, give up on them, and storm back up to heaven. He is gracious with them, isn't he? He says: "Look at my hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it's really me! Touch me and make sure."

The disciples were afraid, but Jesus calmed their fears. Are any of us fearful? Maybe you're the exception, but I think most of us occasionally struggle with fear. Fear about the pandemic, restrictions and requirements... fear about our government, it's leadership and how their values and visions so often seem to conflict with ours. Or we have fears about our health! Our health needs and issues. Fear about things at work, or things with your neighbors, or problems with your finances or your vehicle or your family.

There is a lot to be fearful about. And you know what? Jesus knows all about all of those things! He knows about all of your fears and all of your anxieties and he treats you the same way he treated the disciples in Luke 24. Not by yelling at you... not by telling you your fears are silly... but by graciously and lovingly saying, "Here, look at me."

Looking to Jesus is the only way to get rid of the fear in our lives. When we look at Jesus we are reminded of who He is and who we are: HE is the Lord of the Universe, Creator and Sustainer of all things, and our promised protector and shepherd... WE are his poor, helpless sheep. We don't have to be afraid.

He has things perfectly in control. It might not seem like it. It might seem like all hope is lost. The disciples thought this Jesus was the Messiah, but he had died and was gone. Was all hope lost? Or was God in control?

Looking to Jesus reminds us of who we are and who He is. Jesus calms our fears.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. **The disciples were also processing the emotion of DOUBT.** In verse 38 Jesus says, "Why are your hearts filled with DOUBT?" And even as Jesus showed them his hands and his feet, verse 41 says: "Still they stood there in DISBELIEF, filled with joy and wonder."

Disbelief and doubt are two more emotions that we probably would have had, too, if the three-days-ago-crucified-Jesus suddenly appeared in the room we were meeting in. And disbelief and doubt are things we struggle with, too, aren't they?

It's so easy to doubt. When we read a verse like Romans 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." It's one thing to read that promise... it's another to *actually* believe it, isn't it? "Really God? 'ALL' things work together for good? ALL? Really?"

When you're going through a trial... when you have a big bill that you can't pay, or a major health incident, or an issue with a family member... it's so difficult sometimes to *actually* believe that "All things work together for good," isn't it? It's so easy to doubt.

Unlike the disciples, we don't have the chance to look at and touch and feel the physical body of the resurrected Jesus. We don't have that, but we have something else: the witness and testimony of the Word of God. How could text on a page be as valuable as the physical body of Jesus? Well, look at what Jesus did next for his doubting disciples.

Simply seeing and touching Jesus wasn't enough to take away all the disciples' fears and doubts. What did Jesus do? He pointed them to the Word of God. He said in verse 44: "When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled."

Three places in the Old Testament: the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms. Those three places are how the Jews summarized their entire Bible, the entire Old Testament. So, do you hear what Jesus is really saying here? Jesus is saying that everything in all of the Old Testament was ultimately written about Him. The Old Testament is promise, Jesus is the fulfillment.

Moses said in Deuteronomy 18: "The Lord your God will raise up from among you a prophet like me." In Genesis, which Moses probably wrote, God promised to send someone to crush the head of the serpent. Remember that? He also promised to bless all the nations of the earth through the lineage of Abraham. He promised that a descendent of the tribe of Judah would be the ruler of the entire universe. **These are all about Jesus!**

And the prophets are also about Jesus! Here's one example that you all have heard before. It's

from the prophet Isaiah, prophesying about a future Messiah when he said: “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” He wrote that 700 years before Jesus was born. But it’s about Jesus!

Moses, the prophets, and also the Psalms are all about Jesus. Psalm 89, written almost one thousand years before Christ was born, prophesied that the Messiah would come from the line of David. Psalm 78 says that the Messiah would teach by parables, Psalm 107 says that the Messiah would calm storms and raging waters. Psalm 22 says that the Messiah would be abandoned before his death, that his hands and feet would be pierced, and that his garments would be divided by the soldiers who executed him.

Isn’t that amazing? The whole Bible is about Jesus! Thousands of years of human history... and God has been working on his plan of redemption through all of it. Are we fearful? Do we doubt that God is actually in control and actually knows what’s best for us? Look to the Scriptures. They prove that He’s in control and that NOTHING can stop his perfect plan.

Jesus said in John 5: “You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!” In Luke 24, look at verse 45. It says, “Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.” May that be our prayer, too! May Christ open OUR minds to understand the Scriptures, so our fears and our doubts and our disbelief might also be sent away.

Jesus helped the disciples realize that this entire book is about Jesus. The Old Testament is the promise of a Savior, and the New Testament is about the coming of that Savior. The coming of Jesus. And also the leaving of Jesus, the Ascension.

After these final words with his disciples, Jesus ascended into heaven. He lifted his hands to bless them, and as he was blessing them verse 51 says: “He was taken up to heaven.”

That might be considered a pretty sad ending. Jesus is gone? He just came back from the dead! But look at the disciples' reaction, in verse 52: “So they worshiped him and then returned to Jerusalem filled with great joy. And they spent all of their time in the Temple, praising God.”

**The third emotion** of the disciples was JOY. FEAR...DOUBT...then JOY. Jesus said that forgiveness is available for all, and that He would send the Holy Spirit to fill them with power and

help them be his witnesses and share this message of forgiveness with the entire world. That is incredibly good news, isn't it? Then Jesus blessed the disciples and was carried up and out of their sight.

These are the very last verses in Luke, but do you remember how the Gospel of Luke starts? The very first story that Luke records in this Gospel? It's the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and when Zechariah goes into the temple to offer a sacrifice and burn incense and he hears the voice of God speaking to him, telling him that his wife would soon have a son, John the Baptist.

It's interesting: Zechariah's first response to hearing the voice of God? FEAR. And then his response to hearing the promise? DOUBT. But then do you know what God told Zechariah? "Don't be afraid Zechariah!" "You will have great JOY and gladness." FEAR... DOUBT... JOY.

Luke 1 and Luke 24, the first story and the last story in this book, are very similar! Fear and doubt are turned into JOY. The very first story is someone going to the temple to worship God, and the very last story is the disciples going to that same temple to worship God. It's a perfect and poetic way to start and end the Gospel, but what changed between those two stories?

"Where is Jesus?" For Zechariah, at the beginning of the book, God lived in the temple. His presence was in the temple, and you had to go to the temple to worship him and pray to him and to offer sacrifices to him.

But the birth of Jesus changed everything. The curtain in that temple was torn in two; Jesus gave everyone everywhere free access to God. Before Christ came, in order to take care of your sins you would have to go to the temple and find a priest to sacrifice an animal, in order to restore your broken relationship with God. For you to be made right with God again. And when you sinned again, you'd have to get another priest to sacrifice another animal to cover those other sins.

That's how it used to work. For thousands of years, that's how you could have a relationship with God. That was the only way. But Jesus changed that. He came to bridge the seemingly-unbridgeable gap between sinful humanity and holy God. The message that Jesus came to proclaim is at the end of verse 47: "There is forgiveness of sins for all those who repent."

Forgiveness of sins is not found by going to the temple, by offering sacrifices. It's found by

repenting! It's found by believing!

This isn't a sad ending to the true story here in the Gospel of Luke, is it? It's a fantastic ending! Jesus has ascended into heaven, but we can be filled with JOY, just like the disciples.

"Where is Jesus?" His physical body is not here with us this morning, right? We can't examine the scars in his hands and feet, his pierced side. We can't hear his loving and comforting voice reassuring us that everything is going to be okay... that we don't need to be worried or anxious.

Jesus has ascended. **BUT he isn't gone.** We eat and drink the Lord's Supper each week, we'll do it again in just a few minutes. You know the words that Pastor Wesley and I will say: "This is the body of Christ, broken for you." And "This is the blood of Christ, shed for you."

Jesus said: "This is my body" and "This is my blood." Do we believe Jesus? The wafer sure looks a lot like an ordinary wafer, doesn't it? And that little sip of wine sure just tastes like ordinary wine, doesn't it? But when these simple elements are connected with the powerful and divine Word of God... they are sacraments. They are *actually* the body and blood of Christ in some mysterious way that we can't understand, and we get to *actually* receive the body and blood of Christ each and every week in some mysterious way that we can't understand.

But we don't need to understand everything. We can take Jesus at his word and receive His body and blood joyfully and with thanksgiving.

"Where is Jesus?" Jesus has ascended. But he's also here with us. He gives us amazing blessings of encouragement, forgiveness, and power. Jesus is here, this morning. He is found in His Word when it's read... He is found when the promise of the forgiveness of sins is declared to those of you who believe His promises... and Jesus is found right here in the elements of the Lord's Supper.

Jesus has ascended. But he's not gone. He hasn't left. He lives to constantly and continually strengthen you, nourish you, support you, forgive you, befriend you, uplift you, cherish you, and supply for all of your needs.

He knows when you're afraid. He knows when you're doubting. Just like he did with the disciples, Jesus points you to His Word as the source of your joy and the source of your power.

Where is Jesus? He is risen and he has ascended! We receive the spiritual nourishment and

strengthening he offers to us every week, which empowers and equips us to be his witnesses to all the nations! From Jerusalem to our next-door neighbors.

May our Ascended Savior continue to strengthen us and equip us. Amen.