

Why Do You Stand Looking into Heaven?

Sermon for Ascension Day

Sermon Text: Acts 1: 3-11



He presented Himself alive to them after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴And while staying with them He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, He said, “you heard from Me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” ⁶So when they had come together, they asked Him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” ⁹And when He had said these things, as they were looking on, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. ¹⁰And while they were gazing into heaven as He went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹and 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.”

Most people imagine Jesus' ascension as something out of a science fiction movie. Jesus as a rocket man who was beamed up to heaven before the shocked eyes of the disciples. The fact that His ascension is difficult to imagine can always be seen when people who do not know this story are asked to translate it into another language. For example, at an asylum hearing in court, a judge asked one of our church members to recite the Apostles' Creed. After each Persian sentence, the translator translated what was said into German. When they came to the phrase: 'ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God...' the translator couldn't believe that they meant what they said and so instead said in German: "Christians believe that one day, they will ascend into heaven and sit at the right hand of God." The difficulty with the ascension is that we imagine it spatially. When the Bible talks about heaven, it refers to God's space, which is not just above, but everywhere. When the people of Israel wandered through the desert, God's' presence was also marked by a cloud. The cloud was the space between God and the people. This cloud was both a boundary that the people were not allowed to enter and a reassurance that God was there to guide the people. When Jesus ascends into heaven, it does not mean that Jesus is now high up in heaven – rather, it means that He is now entering the space where He reigns over heaven and earth. Just as Easter shows us that Jesus has conquered death, His ascension shows us that Jesus now reigns over our well-being and is Ruler over heaven and earth and wants to guide our lives here on earth. Above all, the ascension doesn't mean that Jesus is no longer here. Through His life, Jesus not only left us an example that we should follow, which is now becoming increasingly fainter over the centuries. No, Jesus is here! When Jesus ascended into heaven, He is here even more!

We actually see this happening in the book of Acts. Jesus had said: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And this is exactly what the book of Acts tells us about. The Acts of the Apostles is living proof that Jesus is there and working in His church. Jesus will do all this through His disciples, whom He commissions as witnesses. These disciples are not to do anything other than pass on what they have seen and experienced of Jesus. The question is whether these witnesses are the right ones. The witnesses are so unconvincing. We also see this in His ascension. The disciples are looking intently towards heaven. They have not understood anything and have to be admonished by the angels. "Why are you looking up to heaven? This is not the time! Now it's your turn to go to Jerusalem. And pass on all this!" Witnesses, as we see with the disciples and right up to the present day, are only human. They therefore have their limits.

They have nothing in their hands other than the word of Jesus, which they are to pass on. For the disciples and for us, this has remained a challenge. We want to see more! "Where is your God?" People ask. And when they ask this, they reflect a desire that is also in us. We want to see more of God. We want our faith to be more effective, more verifiable. The cloud that hides Jesus from our sight is hard to bear and hard to endure. So often we pray that He will step out of His invisibility and take away the terrible suffering in our world. The disciples, or rather the church, seem to be a poor substitute for this Jesus who has disappeared in a cloud. For example, we hear people say: "Jesus may be good...but His ground staff still leave a lot to be desired!" And people's reactions to this church, as we learn from history, are quite different. The disciples of Jesus and Christians are not automatically perfect like Jesus is perfect. We remain weak and are constantly burdened by many sins. If only the church would triumph a little more over such things, we often think longingly. But Jesus does not have these concerns. Jesus sends these vulnerable, weak disciples. He wants *them* – together with their faults and their sins. And in this way, He shows that the Church is open to all sinners. The Church does not only have room for the powerful and successful, but especially for those who have fallen into sin. And yet the disciples should not go into the world empty-handed. They should not just keep repeating Jesus' words like a mantra. After all, they have more in their hands than one would first suspect. Jesus promises them the Holy Spirit. The disciples should not just go for it but wait for the Holy Spirit. And this promise of Jesus has not ceased to this day. Even if we no longer see it so much here in Europe and in the West, elsewhere in the world, the gospel continues to be proclaimed and more and more people are coming to faith. Even in our regions, we can see the effect of the Holy Spirit. Because here, too, people are coming to faith again and again or rediscovering the faith that they put aside many years ago.

In all of this, we can know something else. Whatever we do, Jesus has turned His face towards us. And Jesus is on His way. He is on His way to us because He is coming again. At the moment, we disciples are standing between the worlds. We are standing between Jesus' ascension and His return. But it is not like we are having trouble choosing between two options. Even if a lot of things are getting out of control in our world, we know that we have a home. Our home is with Jesus in heaven. This doesn't mean that we are rooted to the spot, just looking up to heaven where our home is, and staying put. The angels truly encourage the disciples, knowing of Jesus' ascension, to boldly go into the world and do what just what Jesus had commanded them. Amen.