

Why Look at the Sky?

By Linda Rex

May 29, 2022, ASCENSION Sunday—The past few years I have been slowly working toward a divinity degree. Last week I started a new course with Grace Communion Seminary called Church Planting and Development. As I was writing a reflection paper last night, it occurred to me that the timing of this class fits right in with where we are on the Christian calendar.

Indeed, this Sunday we are celebrating Jesus Christ's ascension, a significant event in God's story. Here we focus on the spiritual reality of the fulfillment of an essential part of Jesus' mission here on earth, him having been sent by the Father to bring all humanity home to eternal fellowship with the Triune God. It was necessary for Jesus to live, die and rise again as God in human flesh in order for all of us to be included in his own intimate relationship with the Father in the Spirit. It is in Jesus' ascension that the mission of God to restore our relationship moves into the realm of the Spirit, who is sent so that each of us individually can participate by faith in what Christ has done.

Luke's gospel version of the ascension event, Luke 24:44–53, gives the impression that it all happened on the same day as the resurrection. However, when he describes the event in Acts 1:1–11, we see that all these things happened over a period of forty days following the resurrection. The disciples and others were given many opportunities to experience firsthand the risen Lord, to talk and eat with him, and to hear him expound the Old Testament scriptures which spoke of his coming and his mission. At the end of this time, he blessed his followers and ascended to his Father's side.

In Acts 1, Christ's followers stood there for a while after being blessed, looking up into the sky. This makes me ask: I wonder how long they stood there before the angels spoke to them, saying, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky?" I can imagine Jesus, having already made the transition into glory, saw them standing there still trying to see him and he finally said to the angels nearby, "I think you're going to have to tell them to quit looking for me and get busy."

But this does speak to what we as the body of Christ have often done when it comes to the whole idea of the ascension. It's as though we believe Jesus is done with his project, has gone home, and we just have to wait until he comes back. Faith in Christ and salvation become all about us being good people who live good lives until Jesus returns in glory. And we miss the point of it all—God bringing all of humanity back into relationship with himself through Christ in the Spirit.

What had Jesus told the disciples to do? He had told them to wait in Jerusalem until they received the promised Holy Spirit. Then they were to go and make disciples, baptize them, teach them, and include them in Christ's mission to the world. Jesus came as God in human flesh to draw all of humanity up into right relationship with God in the Spirit. He's still on that mission. Having been sent by the Father, he has returned home and sent the Spirit to continue his efforts. We, as the body of Christ, are set apart to participate in that mission of reaching out to all the world, sharing the good news and making disciples or new followers of Christ. Our unity and our love in the body of Christ, the church, are meant to testify to the presence of the kingdom of God here on earth by the Spirit, a kingdom in which all people are welcome to participate.

Even at the end of John's apocalypse, he points out the reality of the body of Christ, his bride, being on mission with Jesus. He writes, "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' Let anyone who hears this say, 'Come.' Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life (Rev. 22:17 NASB)." Our role is to join with Jesus in the Spirit to say to the world around us, "Come." Anyone who is thirsty is welcome to come. The water of life is available to everyone now in Christ, so every is able to drink if they so wish. And the body of

Christ, the bride of Christ, the church, is called by God in participation with Jesus by the Spirit to freely offer that water of life to all.

And, if this seems to be an intimidating prospect, consider the indicatives which went with Jesus' command to preach the good news and to make disciples. First of all, as we read in Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus has ascended to his Father's side and has received all authority and power and glory in his exaltation as the risen Lamb of God (Ephesians 1:15–23). Secondly, he has promised to be with us until the end. And thirdly, he has sent the Spirit, the One who empowers us to do the ministry and mission Jesus has called us to. God is doing the heavy lifting—we just get to join in with what he is doing through Jesus in the Spirit.

As Luke explains, our mission to the world begins where we are, and moves in ever-widening spheres of influence as we respond in faith to the voice of the Spirit and move out, sharing the good news of God's love expressed to all of us in Jesus Christ. What is your current sphere of influence? Are there people God has placed in your life that you have conversations with and do everyday activities with? These are opportunities for the gospel. And sharing the good news is what Jesus has called us to participate with him in doing.

When I think about how far God has brought me in this journey of faith, I see that we have traveled a longways together. But I also see that I have only begun to really understand what it means to live on mission with Jesus, and to be a genuine follower of Christ. It is so easy to be distracted with the concerns of everyday life. And so easy, too, to place my focus on how well I am doing in my own relationship with God, rather than on remembering that others need to hear the good news too, and need to experience the joy, unity, and love of the body of Christ for themselves. Oh, for the heart of Jesus for others!

May we remember today, and every day, to pray for the people in our lives, to ask Jesus for opportunities to share the good news, and for the courage and faith to do so. May we quit looking up at the sky and be busy doing what Jesus has called us to do—to move out on mission with him, sharing the good news of all God has done for us in sending his Son and his Spirit for our salvation.

Heavenly Father, thank you for all you have done in sending your Son and your Spirit for our salvation, for drawing us up into life with you now and forever. Grant us the grace to move outside of ourselves into genuine relationship with the people around us, and give us the inspiration, courage, and wisdom to share with them all you have given to us through Jesus and in the Spirit. Amen.

"The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, 'Which,' He said, 'you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.' So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, 'Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.' And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.' " Acts 1:1–11 NASB