

A New Chapter

Acts 1: 6-14 (May 24, 2020)

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6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Historical Context

Falling forty days after Easter, Ascension Day has never held that important a place in the church calendar. Its place in Christian tradition, however, has been securely fixed by its prominent role in Christian creeds and confessions. A myriad of creeds and confessions echo the claim of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed that Christ “ascended into heaven.” Although there are NT references and allusions to Christ’s ascension, only Acts 1 provides a full narrative of the event.

Theme: A New Chapter

Before Jesus departs to an other-worldly existence, he lays out a few additional promises that affirm that his ascension is not the end of a story. Rather, his departure initiates the next chapter in the story of God's salvation. While his words include a command (to remain in Jerusalem for the time being), their dominant thrust is descriptive; he tells them what God will do, and what their lives will look like as a result. No requests. No orders. No threats. No exhortations.

Power, Holy Spirit, testimony about Jesus and forgiveness of sins, participation in God's reign, expansion across cultural and geopolitical lines, opposition - God has impressive things in store for these people as soon as Jesus moves on.

But, if our images of Jesus ascending contribute to a sense of Jesus' removal from human society and our daily experiences, then we've missed the point of the ascension. Don't get caught up in parsing the symbolic sights and imagery of the ascension narrative. Acts resists our questions of *Where?* and *How?* What Acts insists is that Jesus departs from his followers so that he might exercise his authority and influence over all things, places, and powers. The ascension does not mean the cessation of his ministry. It does not mean Jesus' absence. It does not mean the suspension of God's activity to reclaim the world. Quite the opposite. The ascension turns our attention toward what God will yet do and that Jesus' followers will play a part in God's plans. And the plans are ambitious.