



Jesus ascends by John Singleton Copley

The Ascension of Jesus

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The Ascension of Jesus is a powerful reminder of how Jesus bridges the human and divine. Born a vulnerable baby, Jesus survives despite the evil intent of King Herod to kill him and now, a teacher and friend to all people, the resurrected Christ has overcome death, once and for all.

There are various accounts of the Ascension in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, and yet, the most explicit account of Jesus' ascension to Heaven, to reclaim his place on the throne is written in the Acts of the Apostles.

When they had gathered together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He answered them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.

While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven."

Acts 1: 6 - 11

This year, as USCMA continues to build bridges of global solidarity among all the faithful, we would encourage all Christians to reflect upon the significance of the Ascension.

Forty days after the Resurrection, the apostles gathered around Jesus. While the 40-days of Lent was a time of personal reflection where we, nowadays, prepare for the death and resurrection of our beloved; then, the apostles had spent a significantly longer period in the midst of Jesus, his ministry and message, and the devil hardening the hearts of those surrounding them. For them, this gathering on the hillside must have been bittersweet. The Messiah, who they had already watched suffer, die and return to them, "leaves" them again just as they look to him to truly **"restore the kingdom."**

As missionaries, we too look to Jesus to restore the kingdom. However, our perception is slightly different from the apostles who, as Jesus reminds them (and us) did not have an understanding of God's time; the mission of Jesus was not coming to an end but beginning. It is this moment, in Jesus's response to his apostles, that the Church is both given her mission and sent on mission. Ad Gentes beautifully reiterates that the Church does not have a mission, rather mission has a Church.

Unlike the Father who acts by "his own authority," it is Jesus who sends his disciples on mission. Jesus says, **"you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."** As disciples, we are called to bear witness to the Truth, as Jesus did. Our mission goes beyond ourselves to encounter others, to cross borders so we can gossip the Gospel. We are not alone. Even before he ascends, Jesus foreshadows Pentecost - where the Holy Spirit will be with all those who have taken up Jesus' mission.

Jesus proclaims his disciples “will receive power;” this power will enable them to fulfill this mission. Again, the apostles did not yet know the significance of this promise. It is important to recognize the distinction Jesus makes between the Father who acts of “his own authority” and the disciples who are strengthened and made powerful by God.

Then, Jesus ascends; **“as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.”** Imaginably, at that time, the apostles are surprised, confused, and in awe. They are witnesses to this miracle, to the divinity of Jesus. But they are also in some sense being tested to see if the ministry of God has truly taken root, has wholly consumed their hearts and minds, so that they can go forth and preach the Good News. They are a small group of believers, “left” to face the world without Jesus. Now, as missionary disciples, we know that God is the past, present and future; the Ascension reinforces the universal availability of Jesus.

In the midst of Jesus’ ascension, two men appear beside the disciples. This echoes the Resurrection story in the Gospel of Luke where two men appear to the disciples at the tomb, saying **“why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has been raised.”** (Luke 24: 5-6) Now, two men adorned in garments, question the disciples, **“why are you standing there looking at the sky?”** They are challenged to not simply seek Jesus in their present but understand, “This Jesus ” who is familiar to them, **“has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.”** A promise yet to be fulfilled. We have this promise – then and now, as disciples of Christ – that he will “come again to judge the living and the dead.”

The story of the Ascension does have a slight variation in both the Gospel of Luke and Mark. In Luke 24:44 – 53, Jesus appears to his apostles, proclaiming he has fulfilled all that was written, and says, **“I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high”** – the same promise evident in Acts, where the disciples will receive power from God. Then Jesus leads them out, blesses them and ascends into heaven. **“As he blessed them, he parted from them and was taken up to heaven.”** (Luke 24:51) The Gospel of Mark contains two stories – the Commissioning of the Eleven and the Ascension of Jesus.

“[But] later, as the eleven were at table, he appeared to them and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who saw him after he had been raised.

He said to them, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive

out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents [with their hands], and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

Mark 16: 14 – 18

“So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.”

Mark 16: 19 – 20

Jesus ascends to the Father, so his mission – the kingdom of love, justice and peace – becomes our mission. His Spirit becomes our Spirit. His body, our body.

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