

Sermon for the Ascension of our Lord

The text: Acts 1:1–11

After He said this, (Jesus) was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky?' (Acts 1:9-11)

The events surrounding the concluding weeks of Jesus' ministry on this Earth are really quite fascinating and action-packed. This includes His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the resurrection on the Sunday and the weeks after it until His Ascension forty days later.

Up until His entry into Jerusalem Jesus was out and about in all sorts of places: wandering here, there and everywhere. He made himself available to plenty of people, crossing all sorts of boundaries: geographical, cultural and religious. He made Himself available to bring the truths of God's Kingdom to bear on people's lives.

Sometimes Jesus was a bit harder to find. He would withdraw to solitary places in order to be alone; like when He heard news of the death of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:13). But despite this, the crowds still managed to track Him down. They could still find Him in the end.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem at the beginning of what we call 'Holy Week' He very much placed Himself within reach. He went to the most public of places, the Temple, and taught there each day. He wasn't hard to find at all. In fact, at His arrest, late at night in the Garden of Gethsemane, He told those who had come to arrest Him: *'Every day I was with you in the Temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me...'* (Luke 22:53).

Following this, the Son of God allowed Himself to be pinned down in place on the Cross. He was very easy to find that day, lifted high on Golgotha for all to see. After that He was laid in a tomb. Now, it appeared, He wasn't going anywhere anymore. His body could be found readily enough – if anyone cared to look.

Three days after He had died, the women disciples did care to go and look. They went to go and conduct the last rites for the body of Jesus. Only now, they couldn't find His body. And they had no idea where to start looking. Mary told the angels at the tomb: *'They have taken my Lord away ... and I don't know where they have put Him'* (John 20:13).

They would soon discover that they were not dealing with a misplaced body - they were dealing with the resurrection. What followed was a number of instances where Jesus came to find His followers; the same followers who had no idea where to find Him.

The chronology of appearances is not neatly presented in one Gospel account. Putting them all together we find that Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene that Easter morning at the site of the tomb (John 20:16). Next appearance was to Peter, though exactly where and when is unknown. It was prior to Cleopas and the other disciple leaving for Emmaus – because they were the next ones to see Jesus, and that happened late in the day. These two disciples said to Jesus, before they recognised Him: ‘stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over’ (Luke 24:29). When they did finally recognise Jesus they rushed back the 11 kilometres to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples. As they were discussing it that night Jesus came and stood among them and appeared to them as a group – except Thomas who was not with them. (Luke 24:36).

Eight days later, Jesus appeared to the Disciples, once again in their locked room, together with Thomas this time (John 20:26). At some point after this night, the disciples leave Jerusalem and return to Galilee. They are back fishing and Jesus appears to them by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-14).

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, mentions that Jesus also appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time (1 Corinthians 15:6). It would be interesting to know more details about that incident, when and where it occurred, but that is the only mention we have of it in the New Testament.

As you gather together these scattered accounts you get the distinct impression that the post-resurrection Jesus is not so easy to find and track down. He is there one minute, and gone the next. There are 40 days between the Resurrection and Ascension and the recorded sightings of Jesus, in that time, are surprisingly few. The final sighting is at the Ascension itself and that concluded with Jesus being ...taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hiding Him from their sight.

If the post-resurrection Jesus was hard enough to find and keep track of, then how much harder is the post-ascension Jesus? It is not surprising the Disciples stood there looking into the sky as He disappeared from their sight. I wonder what they were thinking? Were they wondering if they would ever see Him again in their lifetime?

And how about us? Jesus told Thomas: ‘*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*’ (John 20:29). We are those apparently blessed ones who have not seen Him with our physical eyes. We have not had visible firsthand experience of the earthly ministry of Jesus. So where do we go to find Jesus? How hard is it for us to track Him down?

Do we stand looking into the sky, hoping for some kind of sign? Do we resign ourselves to simply having to live by faith - what some would call ‘blind’ faith - until

that day when we finally see our Lord face to face? Or is it that it is the risen Lord who comes to find us? Is it that our Lord is out and about in all sorts of places: here, there and everywhere? Is our Lord making Himself available to us, crossing all sorts of boundaries in order to seek us out and find us and bring us into God's Kingdom? Surely the answer is 'yes' to that second bracket of questions. After all, it was Jesus who told His disciples: *'I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.'* (John 14:18). And in Matthew's account of Jesus' Ascension He told His disciples: *'...surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'* (28:20)

The ascension does not remove Jesus from us but places Him in a position whereby He can and does come to us. Listen again to how Paul describes the current location of Jesus in His letter to the Ephesians 1:20-23):

God raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the Heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way.

The Heavenly Throne of God symbolizes His sovereignty. It is from there He stretches out His hand for His people. We hear about this in Psalm 47. The thought of God ruling on high did not discourage the Psalmist – as though God was distant and uncaring. Instead, He declares to the world: *'Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy...Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises'* (v1&6).

The Psalmist declares that it is from this position that God is 'King over all the earth'; it is from this position that He 'reigns over the nations'.

It is **to** this place Jesus has ascended and it is **from** this place He now rules. From this place, Jesus exercises all authority in Heaven and on Earth.

So standing there looking up at the sky wondering when Jesus would come back was not the most helpful of exercises for those first disciples. Similarly, if we live our lives as though Jesus is absent from us or if we find ourselves biding our time here on earth until we finally get our reward in Heaven, then that too is not particularly helpful. Instead, we clap our hands and shout for joy that our Lord and King Jesus is in the very place where He can effect His reign – the very place where He can stretch out His hand to help us and bless us and keep us.

We will struggle to find Jesus if we fail to see that the Ascension has placed Jesus in a position of power that is exercised in the here and now.

So it is, that we find Jesus in worship – though it is probably better to think of our worship as Jesus coming to find us. He comes to us through His word and He ministers to us through it according to our needs. He comes to us in His Holy Supper, strengthening us in body and soul with His presence in this special meal.

But we also find Jesus out and about in our world. He is not lying in a tomb where He is not going anywhere anymore. He is risen from the dead and is the living Lord who is here, there and everywhere. Jesus is there as the truths of God's Kingdom are being proclaimed in His name. Jesus is there as sins are being forgiven in His name - a forgiveness that has come through His death and resurrection. Jesus is there as healing and hope and life are brought to so many people in so many ways.

The first disciples were told to be His witnesses "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). As the first disciples witnessed they discovered that Jesus wasn't hard to find at all. He was out and about - here, there and everywhere. All authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to Him and they saw He was acting on it. As we bear witness to Jesus in our lives He won't be hard to find at all; for He promised to empower us with His Holy Spirit and He promised to be with us always to the very end of the age. Amen.