June 1, 2025
Acts 1:1-11
We've been going through the book of Acts, which was written by the same man who wrote the Gospel of Luke, Doctor Luke, and you may have noticed that the account of Jesus going up into Heaven is recorded twice. It's in the Gospel lesson, and it's recorded here again. The book of Acts is a sequel to Luke's Gospel, and immediately after Luke ends his Gospel with Jesus going up, he begins this book about the Early Church *begins* with Jesus' ascension into Heaven. Why? Why does Luke record it twice? Because it's important. The Ascension is crucial for Christians to understand- especially today. What I mean is this: When Christians get fooled into thinking that if God loves them and is in control, that can expect health, wealth, success, and happiness, it's because they don't understand Jesus' ascension. When Christians get fooled into thinking that any nation or country, especially their own, is "God's kingdom" and that God must want that nation to be powerful, it's because they don't understand Jesus' ascension. When Christians get scared and anxious about pain and loss, persecution and everything that could happen to them and their families and their church, it's because they've forgotten about the Ascension of Jesus. And when Christians get apathetic about their eternally important work of sharing the Gospel and making disciples, or get nervous or cynical about the power of God's Word- sometimes to the point where they need to deny God's Word or downplay it or distract from God's Word in order to gain a modern audience, it's because they don't understand the Ascension of Jesus. That's what we are discussing today: **Jesus Ascends into Heaven, and what it means.**

Luke begins his historical account with Jesus gathering with the disciples, and it's fascinating to see which two things he focuses on most during these precious forty days after he has risen from the dead- The Kingdom of God, and proving to them that he's actually risen from the dead. Remember, the disciples weren't gullible. They were not inclined to believe people could just die and rise from the dead three days later. The reason they insisted on the fact that Jesus did do this wasn't because they wanted it to be true, but because it was and they had gotten undeniable evidence that it was. Jesus also taught them about the Kingdom of God- Luke specifically points that out. When the New Testament has that phrase, the "Kingdom of God," that is its way of talking about God's rule on Earth. In the same way that a kingdom rules a certain space, like America, Germany, and so on, God also rules- but his kingdom isn't measured in land or money, it's measured in hearts- how many people believe in Christ. Another way to talk about the "Kingdom of God" would be the Invisible or Universal Church on Earth. All Christians who believe in Jesus as their savior, that is the Kingdom of God, the Church. Why does Jesus need to spend time talking about specifically that with his disciples? Probably because they don't understand it very well. We see this when Jesus promises that they are going to receive the Holy Spirit in a special way in order for God's Kingdom to come- that they are going to be gifted by the Holy SPirit in a unique and special way, in the same way that John the Baptist baptized people with water, the Holy Spirit is going to shadow over them and fill them in a special way in order to bring people into God's Kingdom- we'll see that next week when we talk about

Pentecost. And the disciples ask Jesus, “Wow! We are going to get the Holy Spirit and God’s Kingdom is going to come. Are you now going to restore the Kingdom back to Israel?” What? What are they asking? The disciples of Jesus, even after three years of learning from him, haven’t quite shed the idea that most Jews believed at the time- that when the Messiah would come and establish his Kingdom, it would be a physical, political kingdom, and Israel would return to its former glory like when David and Solomon reigned. That’s what people were expecting from Jesus- a political/military leader that would kick out the Roman empire and bring Israel to her former glory. Jesus made it pretty clear that the real, most pervasive enemies of God’s people weren’t the Romans, but their sin, Satan and death, and that’s what he came to defeat forever. And the disciples certainly had an understanding of this, but they thought that now that Jesus had won his ultimate victory, he would give this victory over the Romans too for the political nation of Israel.

Jesus’ response to that is fascinating. He doesn’t smack them on the head and say, “You fools! THat’s not why I’m here! How do you not get that?” He essentially tells them, “None of your business. God will decide how and when his kingdom comes. If he wants to do it in Israel right now through political power, fine. If he so chooses to let the Roman empire dominate Israel, that’s his business, and his kingdom will still grow.” And then Jesus gives the disciples a job: It’s not their job to try to establish an earthly, political kingdom. It’s not their job to decide who’s in and who’s out based on race or nationality. In fact, they are thinking too small. God’s salvation isn’t just for Israel, it’s for Samaria, and all the ends of the earth. And then Jesus ascends into Heaven- which makes us ask the question: why? Why would Jesus have to actually go up into Heaven? He’s God! He can do everything! He didn’t need to physically rise up into Heaven- he could have just gone up there. He didn’t do it for him, he did it for his disciples, and really, us. When Jesus ascends back into Heaven, it’s a clear, unmistakable testimony and proof that Jesus is in control of all things, that he rules the universe as God. He is the lord of history. Nothing happens without his knowing. Nothing can happen that he doesn’t allow. The God that came into this world as a weak, frail human being for you, who suffered the wrath of God so that you could be his friend and never have to wonder about your status before God, who has earned for you eternal joy and love, he is the one in control of all things. Everything. You are not in control of the universe, but your greatest friend absolutely is. And that means a few things.

1. **Jesus is in control of all things, even in pain and suffering.** When Jesus ascended to the right hand of God, equality with God the Father, was he in control of all things? Yes. When the disciples went out and shared the Gospel, and Holy Spirit worked through their preaching and people were brought to faith in Jesus, was Jesus in control? Clearly! When the disciples were violently killed by mobs, assassinated, imprisoned, even tortured for telling people about Jesus- exactly what they were supposed to do, was Jesus still in control? When countless people came to faith, leaving behind their gods for Jesus, what Jesus in control? Clearly? When many of those countless people were imprisoned, tortured and killed for refusing to renounce their faith in

Jesus, was Jesus still in control? Yes. During the Reformation, when God worked through Martin Luther to bring people back to the free Gospel and the truth of the Scripture, was Jesus in control? Of course! But when Lutheran teachers were burnt at the stake, and war and famine ravaged God's people, and pastors were doing hundreds of funerals per week, burying their children and spouses, was Jesus still in control? Yes. And Lutheran pastors, even during their horrible pain, understood that if Jesus is truly as good as he is, and if he truly died for his people, and if he truly ascended and is in control of all things, he can be trusted. Paul Gerhard, whose hymn we just sung a few weeks ago, who lost 4 out of 5 of his children in their youth, and his wife, wrote these words:

Now I will cling forever
to Christ, my Savior dear,
My Lord will leave me never;
with him I need not fear.
He rends death's iron chain;
he breaks through sin and pain.
He shatters hell's dark thrall;
I follow Him through all.

He brings me to the portal
that leads to bliss untold,
whereon this rhyme immortal
is found in script of gold:
"Who there my cross has shared
finds here a crown prepared;
who there with me has died
shall here be glorified."

Is Jesus in control of all things when your bank account is full, when things are going well, and you are happy, healthy, and prosperous? Of course- he is the one that blesses you! Is he still in control when you lose your loved ones, when you don't recieve the blessings you ask for, when you are sad, lonely, and depressed? Yes. He is, and he still loves you. And although he can't always be understood, he can be trusted.

2. **Embrace his timing.** We have to address this issue because it's almost exactly what the disciples struggled with. When the disciples looked at their Jewish culture, they were rightly frustrated. There was a lot of religious hypocrisy, people going through the motions, people not worshiping God the right way, immoral living, and the Romans who were running things were certainly not helping! And they thought that God would solve these issues through political power relatively soon! And Jesus says, "God's timing is not your timing." God gave justice to the Romans for their oppression in due time. Meanwhile, God didn't need a political entity to

save souls. He didn't need to restore the kingdom to political Israel in order to restore and grow his true, spiritual Israel, his Church. Even during times of shocking immorality and persecution, God grew his Church. He was in control. When I hear people talk about everything wrong with our culture and how we need to bring America back to God, which usually means voting for a particular candidate and assuming that it would help God do his work, I feel empathy. I do. I'm also angry and upset about the problems in or culture. I also hate that unborn life is treated like a nuisance. I also hate that immorality is celebrated by our culture. Christians should be concerned about those things. But Jesus is still in control. And the perfect, moral society in which God is honored is never going to exist until humans are no longer sinful, which will happen when Jesus comes back. Our job is the same job as the disciples: not to be moral police, but to proclaim the good news of Jesus, and as people come to faith, they will then embrace Jesus and his rules. God is the one who controls when he comes back and brings justice back on this broken world. Trust his timing. Which brings me to my final point.

3. **No one should be more confident than Christians.** We are going to be okay. Let me say that again. We are going to be okay. Christians are going to be okay. This culture and country might crumble and decay, which would be very sad, but that's what countries do! We are going to be okay. We may have to sacrifice our comforts and commodities for the faith. That's what Christians do! We are going to be okay! Satan might come and cause us pain. Life may get difficult- for some it already has. We are going to be okay. God may say no to some prayers, and he may graciously take things from us. We are going to be okay. Jesus is still in control during hard times. We are going to be okay- actually, much better than okay. Because Jesus is coming the way he came, and all things are going to be right, and we are going to be eternally, perfectly, beautifully okay. That's what the Ascension means. Amen.

Ascension at St. Paul's

This nation is a mess. Things are getting bad. Morally and spiritually. People don't know about God anymore, and they really don't even care and the government certainly isn't helping! Remember the good old days when worship was important to people, when religious leaders were respected and God was the God of the nation and the government knew that and respected that! We need to take this nation back for God and get the right people in power so God's kingdom can come and he can reign. Jesus, are you at this time, finally going to restore the kingdom to Israel and make Israel great again? Israel needs to become the God-pleasing nation it used to be! Oh. Did you think I was talking about America? No. This is the mindset of the disciples. They assumed that Jesus is going to do what they've always been hoping for him to do- make Israel great again like the glory days of David and Solomon. Kick out the Romans so that God can reign again in Israel and Israel can be a god-pleasing, righteous, moral place again. And Jesus says, "stay in your lane. He will establish a perfect world with perfect laws and perfect justice when he wants to." And then Jesus shows the disciples that their hopes are far too small. God doesn't simply want the power of the Gospel to stay in Israel, but to throughout the ends of the earth! And then he ascends. Why? He could have just disappeared, but he went up. Why? To teach them and us that his work is completed, and he is returned to the throne of power. That the God who came for us, suffered for us, rose for us, is ruling all things in the universe for us. That's what the ascension means.

American Christians sometimes forget that. Does Jesus need to be acknowledged by the governmental leaders of a nation and have the Law of his Word be the law of the land in order for him to work powerfully through his people? Does the Christian faith need to be respected and honored by a culture, or even legal in order for it to spread quickly and for the Church to grow? Does Jesus need his people to get the "right" people in positions of power in order for his will to be done? No. In fact, as you look at history, the opposite is true. The more illegal Christianity is, the more Christians are mowed down, the more the Church grows. Tertullian was a church father in the Roman Empire during a time when Christianity was illegal, and he had a famous quote: "Semen est Sanguis Christianorum." The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church- the more you mow us down, the more we grow. The reason I say this is because , like the disciples we are tempted to put our hope and confidence in things that will ultimately disappoint us and rob us of the joy and peace God wants us to have because of the Ascension of Jesus. Is it possible that Jesus may allow this beloved nation of ours to fall, or be taken over by someone else? Yes- it happens all the time- and if it does, Jesus is still on his throne, he has not failed, you are going to be okay. Is it possible that Jesus may allow our culture to be violently opposed to the Christian faith, and that Jesus may ask you to endure persecution- loss of job, friendship, or even life? That's what happened to his disciples. It is possible, and if it happens, you'll be okay. Is it possible that Jesus may ask you to endure painful trials, infertility, loss of loved ones, poverty, loneliness, rejection, depression, distress, or violence? Yes- and he is still in control, and you will be okay. If Jesus is truly on the throne of the universe, then everything that happens to you, also

happens for you- for your good, for your blessing, controlled and allowed by your greatest and most loving friend, who although he can't be fully understood, he can be trusted.

I want to tell you about one of the most influential christians of all time- a brilliant man named Philip Melanchthon. Philip began college when he was 12 years old, and by the time he was 21, he was a respected scholar in mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, and even published a book on Greek grammar. He was a genius. He was also close friends with Martin Luther, and he wrote some of the most important theological documents in the Lutheran Reformation. He was also a chronic worrier. He worried about the Muslim Turks invading Europe. He worried about the Pope's false doctrines that were leading Christians astray and the emperor who was actively trying to kill Luther and those who followed his teachings. He worried about Christians and pastors who couldn't even say the Lord's Prayer! And whenever he got into a worrying fit, Luther would put his hand on Philip and say, "Let Philip cease from ruling the world." My friends, let the Christians in this building cease from ruling the world. You are ultimately not in control of your lives, your ministry, or anything going on around you- and thank the Lord for that because the one who is infinitely more loving, more compassionate, more wise than you or I will ever be. Jesus reigns- you and I are going to be okay. Pain will come, but we will be okay. Because Jesus as ascended. Jesus reigns. Jesus is coming again. You have nothing to fear. Amen.