Ascension
Acts 1:6-12

A few days before Easter, one of Su's friends, who's our age, Swiss, and not yet a Christian, said to her excitedly, 'Su, you'll never guess what! Did you know that Easter is all about Jesus?' To which Su replied, 'yes, I did.'

And if you're a Christian you might think, 'how could you *not* know that!?' Ok, but what about Ascension? Because ask the average person, what does Ascension mean to you?', they'd probably go, 'Oh, I love Ascension! Long weekend, Thursday and Friday off, chance to go away. I wish every weekend was Ascension!"

And if I were to ask you, would your response be much different from that? Obviously you've not gone away for a long weekend, but what does it mean? I mean, Christmas we get - Jesus' birth. Easter we get - Jesus death and resurrection. But Ascension? Jesus ascending back to heaven? What's that got to do with anything?

And yet, it's not just in the Bible, it's in the Apostles' Creed - which is short, and concise, and leaves a whole lot out. But when the writers came to the Ascension, they clearly decided, 'this stays, this matters: He ascended into heaven.'

Now, if you're not yet a Christian, you might think, 'Why would you believe that?' And if you are a Christian you might struggle to explain why you *do* believe it.

Ok, but what if Christ's ascension really does matter, and not just because it's in the creed. For example, what if it has something to say to the self-loathing you feel when you look in the mirror? Or to your fear of what other people think of you, and how the desire to have them think good things about you can lead you to do bad things? Or what if it has something to say to those times when you feel guilty, or lonely, or even abandoned by God? And think of the times when life feels out of control and you feel at the mercy of events? What if the Ascension has something to say to all that and more?

Then it might be just a bit bigger than a long weekend, mightn't it?

So, we're going to look at four things. How does he go? Where does he go? Why does he go? And how should we now live?

How Does He Go?
Look at Luke 24:51, 'While he [Jesus] blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.' But notice the extra detail in Acts, 'As they were looking on, he was lifted up, *and a cloud* took him out of their sight' (1:9).

Now if you're English or, worse, Dutch, you read 'cloud' and think - normal day. But if you're thinking biblically, that is not your response. Because in the Bible *cloud* is a marker of God's presence. The people of Israel are led out of slavery in Egypt by a cloud - God going before them. At Mt Sinai, and the giving of the Law, God comes down in a cloud. When they erect the tabernacle we're told, 'Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.' (Ex 40:34). When Daniel saw his vision of the Ancient of Days he says, 'Behold, with *the clouds of heaven* there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days' (Dan 7:13). And when Jesus was transfigured, and the disciples got a glimpse of his glory - a cloud covered them, and out of that cloud came the voice of God.

Now, in English, there's an expression, 'no smoke without fire'. Well, biblically, there's no cloud without God. And so as Jesus is lifted up by a cloud, we're supposed to be seeing God's glory and Christ's divinity taking him up.

Great, but if that's what you're supposed to see, what *don't* you see? You don't see his body falling to the ground like a husk do you? You don't see him shedding the chrysalis of his body, like some divine butterfly, pealing of his humanity to reveal the real, divine, authentic Jesus underneath. You don't see him discarding his body, like you might toss aside the packaging of your latest Amazon, or dare I say it, Temu, order.

So, when the Son of God descended, and was born as a baby, he came in a body, and when he ascends he takes his body with him. He returns to heaven as a real, human, embodied man. So for all eternity, God has taken to himself a body.

Think of the implications of that. It tells you the body matters - to God. It tells you that Jesus hasn't just come to save you *spiritually*. He's not just come to redeem your soul. He's come to redeem you body and soul.

And if Christ values his body, he values yours. You may look at yourself and hate yourself. Christ does not. He looks at you and loves you. He does not toss *his* body aside and neither does he yours. It's why the psalmist says of God, 'You knitted me together in my mother's womb. I am fearfully and wonderfully made' (Ps 139:13-14). And that was true of Jesus and his body, but it's also true of yours.

And that does not dismiss the suffering we might experience in our bodies. Because Jesus suffered in his. And yet his wounds were not airbrushed out or erased in his resurrection body. He appears to Thomas and says, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side" (John 20:27). And so as he ascends to heaven, he takes those wounds with him. And the bearer of scars is glorified.

As the hymn puts it, 'Crown him the Lord of love; behold his hands and side; Rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified.'

But why do his wounds remain? So that yours will not. Because he was broken to make you whole. And all our suffering now - whether your bodily pain or shame, or childlessness or broken dreams and desires - is not worth comparing to the glory to come. And where he is now, we will one day go. And the day will come when everything, including our bodies, will be redeemed.

But secondly…

Where Does He Go?

And the obvious answer is, heaven! Acts 1:11: As the angels say to the disciples, "Why do you stand looking *into heaven*? This Jesus who was taken up from you *into heaven,* will come in the same way as you saw him go *into heaven*."

But if you were to ask someone, 'where are you going on holiday?" And they replied, 'Switzerland' you'd follow up, wouldn't you? 'Where in Switzerland?'

So where in heaven? Well, when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was facing imminent death, Luke tells us he was, 'full of the Holy Spirit, [and] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, *and Jesus standing at the right hand of God*' (7:55).

Now, if you came to our place for dinner and I said, 'sit at my feet' you would not be impressed. But if I were to say, 'hey come sit beside me', you might still not be impressed but at least you'd feel welcomed.

But in the ancient world, to be placed at the right hand of *the king* was to be sat in the seat of honour. In terms of climbing the social ladder, there was no rung higher.

It's why Paul says in Ephesians 1, that God, 'Raised [Jesus] from the dead *and seated him at his right hand* in the heavenly places, *far above* all rule and authority and power and dominion.' (v20-21). In other words, there is no higher or better seat to be had!

Except… the throne itself. And in Revelation 3:21 Jesus says, "I conquered and sat down with my Father *on his throne*."

And so Jesus, who came to the lowest place, has been exalted to the highest. And the One who was beaten and humiliated, spat upon and stripped, nailed to a cross and crowned with thorns, is now crowned with glory. And in the entire expanse of the universe there's no one greater or more glorious.

Now when someone wins gold at the Olympics, they get to stand on a podium. But Jesus sat down on a throne. Because, he says, 'I conquered.' And the battle has been won, and our enemies of sin and shame, death and satan are vanquished.

But what if you could share in that victory? What if the gold medal could be hung around your neck? Well, you can and it is, Paul writes: because God has 'raised us up with him and *seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ*.' (Eph 2:5-6). Because when you put your trust in Christ, and you're united with him, his victory becomes your victory, and where he's sat, you're sat.

So think what that means for when you face ridicule or even just embarrassment for being a Christian or for standing up for what's true. Like for you guys involved in street evangelism - and someone just blanks you. Or at work, or on campus, when your beliefs are just dismissed. And because what people think of us matters to us, that can hurt. So we can be tempted to stay quiet or even compromise. But when we face something like that, in some small way we are sharing in Christ's humiliation. And the Ascension tells you, yes, but you also get to share in his exaltation. They may look down on you, but God your Heavenly Father says, don't look at them, look at Christ, sat at my right hand and come, take your seat with him.

Ok, but if that's *where* he goes… third point….

Why Does He Go?

Firstly, ***He ascends to reign***.

Peter writes, Jesus 'has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers *having been subjected to him*' (1 Peter 3:22). So when Jesus ascends and sits, he's not

sitting down in an easy chair or a bar-stool, is he? When he sits he sits as king, and the ascension is his enthronement. And now there is nothing and nobody that will not bow before him.

But just for a moment, scroll back in your Bible to the beginning, and the task God gives humanity: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, *and have dominion*" (Gen 1:28). But Adam failed in that task, but Christ has not. And the ascension tells us that a Man, the second Adam, has taken his place as the ruler of the universe.

Which means, when you feel at the mercy of events, you're not. When you feel like you've messed up and God's plan for your life is in tatters, it's not. When you feel like the world is spinning out of control, it's not. Christ has ascended to rule, and your life is in his hands.

Secondly, ***He ascends to intercede***
Now when we first moved to Switzerland, one of our daughters was getting grief from one of her teachers, and we were struggling to address it because we spoke no French. Until we told a friend, who was a retired teacher, and she said, 'Nonsense. We are making an appointment and I am coming with you.' And she did, and she went in all guns blazing and let's just say we had no further trouble from the teacher.

But sometimes you need someone to speak up for you, don't you? Maybe a lawyer, or a negotiator, or even just a translator. And they put your case, or fight your corner.

And John writes, 'If anyone does sin, *we have an advocate* with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous' (1 John 2:1). And Paul says, 'Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died - more than that, who was raised - who is at the right hand of God, who indeed *is interceding for us*' (Rom 8:34). And the writer to the Hebrews says that Jesus ascended so that he can 'appear in the presence of God *on our behalf*' and 'always lives *to make intercession*' for us (Heb 9:24; 7:25).

Now, have you ever been in a situation when you have been so nervous you could hardly speak, or you couldn't stop speaking? When I went for my first job interview as a junior doctor, I was determined to tell them that I was a Christian, but I was so nervous that when the senior doctor on the panel asked me the first question, I think I must have told them way too much, and they were looking at me like I was mad. And eventually the senior guy said something like, 'thank you, but maybe you could answer my original question. What has your previous medical experience been to date?'

Ok, but what if instead of sitting before a potential employer you were standing before God, the judge of all the earth. And what if instead of asking for a job, you were pleading for your life. But you've got all this evidence - your sin and guilt - stacked up high against you? How would you even begin to form your words or articulate your defence?

But what if, before you could say a word, the Son at the Father's right hand said, 'let me speak for him, or her, Father'. And what if he stood in your defence, and spoke of how he'd borne your sin, and paid your debt? And what if he was your go-between, your advocate, your intercessor? And not as a one-off event but that he lives to do that for you?

Well, that is what he's ascended to do. As that great hymn puts it, 'Before the throne of God above, I have a strong and perfect plea, A great High Priest whose name is love, Who ever lives and pleads for me.'

But you know what? His speaking up for you does not turn you silent. It does the opposite. It makes you bold. Because when your confidence is in him and not yourself, it loosens you tongue in prayer for yourself and others. As the writer to the Hebrews says, 'Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. *Let us then <u>with confidence</u> draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.'* (4:14–16)

It's like you've been given security clearance, 'Access all areas', even, especially, the throne room of God. And because Jesus is always welcome, you're always welcome. Because he's always heard, you're always heard. And because his standing will never fall, neither will you.

Thirdly, ***He ascends to give***
And on the night he was betrayed, Jesus said, "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). And at the first Pentecost, Peter said of Jesus, 'Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing' (Acts 2:33). And so Jesus ascension becomes the launch pad for the Spirit.

And if you want to hear more about that you'd better come back next Sunday!

Fourthly, ***He ascends to return***
During the Second World War, when the tide was beginning to turn in favour of the Allies, Winston Churchill gave a speech and said, "This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

And as the disciples stood looking upwards the angels said to them, "This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Which means, the cross was not the end. And the resurrection was not the end. And Jesus ascending and sitting down and pouring out the Spirit were not even the end. But the ascension is the end of the beginning, and as he ascended he will one day return.

You see, a couple of summers ago, Su and I spent a week near Milan. And I worked out all the places St Augustine had visited, and I took Su to visit them too. Including the church that houses the mausoleum that houses his bones. I mean, you can imagine how much Su loved it.

But funnily enough, there is no church that houses Jesus' bones. Because if the ascension tells us, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, that Jesus 'always lives to make intercession for us, it also tells us he always lives. And if he's alive, he's waiting - for the day he returns as King.

So, as we wait, fourth point…

How Should We Now Live?

Well, firstly, look again at Acts 1:10-11, ‘While they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, *why do you stand looking into heaven?*”

Why? Maybe because Jesus has just ascended? Maybe because we’ve just seen something incredible?

But the angels aren’t disputing that, are they? It’s that the disciples’, and our, response to Jesus’ ascension is not to stand still, gawping. Instead, there’s work to be done: there are prayers to be prayed, there's the Spirit to be received, and there’s a gospel to be proclaimed. And so Luke tells us the disciples ‘worshipped him *and returned to Jerusalem* with great joy’ (24:52).

And when it sinks in that Christ has ascended and is sovereign over all our lives and all our troubles, you’ll know you’re safe and have nothing to fear, from troubles or anyone else. And the joy - not fear - can fill your heart like it filled theirs.

Secondly, Christ has ascended and been enthroned as King. Which means, we’re not. And, he’s ascended bodily, with means our bodies matter. And, if he’s king and we’re not, we can’t do with our bodies whatever we want. Instead, as Paul says in Romans 12, offer your body to Christ as a living sacrifice, as an act of worship, that he would take you and use you, for his glory and others’ good.

Because, thirdly, the ascension tells us that one day he’ll return, so… we don’t stand around gawping. There’s good news to be proclaimed. Beginning with our own hearts.

You see, if the ascension tells us there’s nothing in the whole universe greater or more glorious than Jesus, the truth is we’re always giving our hearts to other stuff that’s less great and less glorious. It’s why Paul writes, ‘If then you have been raised with Christ, *seek the things that are above*, *where Christ is*, seated at the right hand of God. *Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth*.’ (Col 3:1-2)

Because it’s as we see Christ ascended and reigning, and love and treasure him above everything else, that we’ll be able to love and serve and sacrifice for him and for those he’s placed around us.