



ASCENSION 2009
Pastor Lance Steicke
ACTS 1:1-11

So he's gone.
He's gone.

The Surgeon comes out into the waiting room where you've been waiting anxiously and shakes his head and says, He's gone.

The disciples stand looking up to heaven and say, He's gone. Jesus is gone.

Not so. Not so at all.

Ascension is about the presence of Jesus; not his absence.

Martin Luther: **WHEN JESUS WAS ON EARTH, HE WAS FAR FROM US; NOW HE IS VERY NEAR TO US.**

If Jesus had **not** ascended, if Jesus were still on earth, he would be confined to a particular place – Jerusalem and Judea. If we wanted to **see** him and hear him we would have to go there – or wait until one of his infrequent visits to us in Australia.

Jesus didn't go away from us when he ascended into heaven. He returned to the Father, it's true. But he gave us his promise, **I WILL BE WITH YOU ALWAYS TO THE END OF THE AGE.** He sends the Holy Spirit who continues his presence, who brings Jesus and all his blessings to us.

I repeat, Ascension is about the presence of Jesus; not his absence.

The disciples wanted to make Ascension a star-gazing event. They were standing there gazing up into heaven. I think if I'd been there, I'd be gazing up into heaven, too. If you'd been there, I suspect you'd be doing the same.

And why not? The most dramatic incident in the history of the world is happening right before your very eyes.

Why shouldn't you be gazing up into heaven?

The one who had been the centre of your life these past years;
The one on whom your hopes had clung;
The one who was so dear to you, your best friend;
That one has just disappeared behind a cloud.

Why shouldn't you be looking up into heaven?

This was the climax of his ministry.

The Gospel accounts end with the ascension.
Not the crucifixion, not the resurrection, but the ascension into heaven is the climax.
He came from the Father; now he returns to the Father.
He came on a mission; only now is that mission complete.

Otherwise he would have gone back home earlier.

What was his mission? The rescue and redemption of the whole human race. That was done on Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

But what if he had ascended into heaven immediately after his resurrection? How would we know what to do and what our mission is?

For the past 40 days Jesus has been demonstrating that he is alive and he's been instructing us.

FOR 40 DAYS AFTER JESUS HAD SUFFERED AND DIED, HE PROVED IN MANY WAYS THAT HE HAD BEEN RAISED FROM DEATH. HE APPEARED TO THE APOSTLES AND SPOKE TO THEM ABOUT GOD'S KINGDOM.

And now having proved that he is alive and having instructed us, now he goes home.

And we are standing out there in the car park or in the street out front or from a high vantage point somewhere in Hamilton. And we are looking up.

And as we do so, two men in white robes come and stand there with us. And they remind us in gentle, but forceful language why we can't spend our time sky gazing.

Sky gazing may look pious, but that's not what the world needs. What the world needs is people who have the Spirit of God, and because they have the Spirit of God, don't hang around sky gazing, but get going.

Ascension then is a warning against constant star gazing.

John Glenn, one of America's early astronauts, has illustrated this beautifully in his alleged conversation with one of the Russian astronauts. Tito asked Glenn with a somewhat arrogant smile, '**Did you by any chance encounter God on your space flight?**'

Glenn, '**The God in whom I believe is not the sort you could see from the window of a space capsule.**'

Where is God? **THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AMONG YOU.** God is here. God is present. God is not confined to a particular space. And while the bible may speak of heaven as a place, we have no idea what the place is or where it is. And it's idle to speculate. The kingdom of God is among you. The ascension of Jesus is all about his presence, not his absence.

So if you want to look to Jesus don't stand there gazing up into heaven as into space. Look here on earth.

- Look at the word of God. Jesus comes to you in that word.
- Look at the Sacraments. Jesus was brought to you at baptism. Jesus comes to you in the sacrament of the altar.
- Look at fellow human beings. When you give a glass of cold water to another in need you are giving it to Jesus.

Ascension is not only about the presence of Jesus rather than his absence. It's about the reality of the presence of Jesus.

Be relevant, is the cry to the churches and to preachers – be relevant. Well, there's nothing more relevant than the presence of Jesus.

But somehow, some people, perhaps many people, feel the reality of the devil more than they do the reality of Jesus.

There's the story of Martin Luther one night seeing an apparition of the devil at the foot of his bed. Whether he was dreaming or whether he literally saw the devil or an apparition, we don't know. He was convinced he was seeing the devil. And being thus convinced that it was the devil, he said, 'Oh, it's only you', and turned over and went back to sleep.

Luther knew the presence of the living Jesus and the reality of that presence. He knew that Jesus had conquered the devil and that he had conquered him for us. And so he need not fear the devil.

But the reality of Jesus and his presence is, of course, not seen in apparitions and visions. A number of years ago a so-called outline of Jesus appeared on the wall of a church in Yankalilla in the Adelaide Hills. That's not the kind of thing we should get excited about as though that all of a sudden proves the reality of Jesus.

If an apparition or an outline of Jesus appeared on the wall here alongside the pulpit or on the front of the pulpit would that make Jesus more real? Would we all of a sudden react: now I know Jesus is for real. I've seen his outline in our church.

The presence of Jesus in my life is not determined by my feelings or lack of them; it's not determined by apparitions or the lack of them. It's determined by the word of God. It's determined by what is taught in this pulpit, not by what's seen on it or alongside of it.

So if ascension is about the presence and reality of the living Lord Jesus, it's also about the manner of his presence. He is present in his word.

There's all sorts of waffly thinking around about the manner of Jesus' presence.

In Luke 24, today's Gospel, **Jesus**, we are told, **opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.**

This should be our constant prayer. Lord Jesus, open the understanding of our minds. Open our minds to the Scriptures. Open the Scriptures to us. Show us your presence in the Scriptures. Show us who you are and what you've done for us.

You see, how can our minds be opened, if they aren't opened by the Lord himself and his Holy Spirit through the word of God?

I will only get to know another person by communication – listening to them, speaking to them. That's why marriage guidance counsellors stress the supreme importance of communication between couples.

We become estranged from God when we don't hear his word and when we don't speak to him in worship.

And on the other side of the coin we grow in our relationship with him when we do hear his word and speak to him in worship.

If ascension is about the presence and reality of the living Lord Jesus in his word, it's also about his presence in and through his Holy Spirit.

DO NOT LEAVE JERUSALEM, BUT WAIT FOR THE GIFT MY FATHER PROMISED, WHICH YOU HAVE HEARD ME SPEAK ABOUT.

And that gift, of course, is the Holy Spirit.

In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul says, **DO NOT RESTRAIN THE HOLY SPIRIT; DO NOT DESPISE INSPIRED MESSAGES.**

Some translations says, **DON'T QUENCH THE SPIRIT.**

Don't put out the Spirit's fire. Far from extinguishing the Spirit, we must let him both shine and burn within us. In that way we reveal the presence of Jesus.

Paul isn't referring to the miraculous works of the Spirit, not to the extraordinary but the ordinary. He's really saying to the Thessalonians: let the Holy Spirit guide and prompt you. Let the Holy Spirit guide and prompt you in pastor-people relationships, in people-people relationships. Let the Holy Spirit guide and prompt you in your corporate life as a congregation leading you to be the happy, praying, thankful people God wants you to be. Don't quench these promptings of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise you are squashing and inhibiting the presence of Jesus in your lives.

DO NOT RESTRAIN THE HOLY SPIRIT; DO NOT DESPISE INSPIRED MESSAGES.

The two go together. The Spirit and the word. The word and the Spirit. And both bring the presence of Jesus to us and make his presence real for us. We must never divorce what God has married, namely the word and the Spirit. The word of God is the Spirit's sword. How does the Spirit work? He works through the word of God. How do you get to know and understand the word of God? That's the work of the Spirit.

The Spirit without the word is weaponless. The word without the Spirit is powerless.

A congregation, any congregation, will always have issues to attend to and address.

This will include matters pertaining to worship.

It will include training and instruction,

mission and outreach.

marriage and family life

problem-solving in relationships.

Now if you want to address any of these issues, don't address them on the basis of your own spirit and wisdom, Paul is saying, but turn to the Holy Spirit and the power and wisdom of God in his word.

And both the Holy Spirit and the word of God always testify of, and point to, Jesus. In the final analysis the source and centre of everything in congregation and in life is the gospel, the good news of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

- Flowing out of the gospel will be good relationships between people and people in a congregation.
- Flowing out of the gospel, God's amazing love in Jesus Christ, will be a happy church, a praying church, a thankful church.
- Flowing out of the gospel will be the life and vitality that motivates and provides the dynamism for a Christian congregation.

How could we possibly have soured relationships when we know the amazing grace and forgiveness of God, when we know that God comes to us in our unhappiness, prayerlessness, thanklessness and says, I forgive you. I welcome you back as a repentant believer. I don't hold your sins against you but blot them out for the sake of the suffering and death of my Son, Jesus Christ. You are forgiven.

Acknowledgement of that and acceptance of that is an indication of the presence of Jesus, the centrality of Jesus

That's what I wish for you— a congregation with Jesus and his gospel at the centre, a congregation that lives on the grace, mercy and forgiveness of a gracious God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

He has gone home but he is always and forever present with us. Amen.