



Acts 1:3-11 ³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, "Men of Galilee, 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."

In the name of Jesus Christ, our risen and ascended King, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

A person's final words before death very often have great significance. When the Apostle Paul was nearing his end, he said, ***"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me."*** (2 Tim 4:67-68) In the year 155 AD, an elderly Christian named Polycarp faced death at the hands of the Romans when he refused to curse Jesus. He said, *"I've served Him for eighty-six years, and He has done nothing but good for me. How could I curse Him, my Lord and Savior?"* Martin Luther, on his deathbed, said, *"Our God is the God whom salvation comes from. God is the Lord by whom we escape death. Into Your hands I commit my spirit: God of truth, You have redeemed me!"*

In our text for today, no one died. But there were some very significant last words spoken on that Ascension Day. It was the last chance the disciples had to speak to Jesus in the flesh, and the last chance Jesus had to do the same. What significance do their last words hold? Let's find out, as we consider the theme:

"THE FAMOUS LAST WORDS OF ASCENSION DAY"

- I. The disciples' words reveal their ignorance
- II. The Savior's words reveal their assignment
- III. The angels' words promise His future return

As you know, ascension means, "going up." When we said the Apostles' Creed a few moments ago, we confessed that Jesus suffered for our sins and was buried, "He descended into hell, and the third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven..." It was exactly forty days after His resurrection, and Jesus was about to return to His heavenly throne. Was He leaving His disciples? Not really. He would of course continue to be with them: ***"Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."*** (Mt 28:20) But it was the last time they would enjoy His physical presence, the last time

they would see Him with their eyes, the last opportunity they would have to speak to Him and ask Him questions face to face. Only a few minutes left! And how did they use that last golden opportunity? They asked Him—well, they asked Him kind of a dumb question!

“They asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’” Evidently, the disciples still thought that Jesus was going to make Himself an earthly King, and rule over an earthly kingdom. Since He had shown He has the power to heal people and perform miracles—even rise from the dead—well, then, He obviously had the power to kick the Romans out of Israel and restore the nation to its former glory! What He was waiting for?

The disciples’ words revealed their ignorance. Jesus had spent countless hours instructing them, teaching them that the Kingdom of God isn’t a place. It’s His ruling in the hearts of believers by faith. He told them countless parables, trying to teach them about His kingdom in words they’d understand. Over and over He’d said it: ***“My kingdom is not of this world.”*** And again, ***“The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.”*** (Lk 17:20-21) Wherever there is a person who repents of their sins and in faith turns to Christ for forgiveness, Jesus says, that’s where the kingdom of God is. But still the disciples didn’t get it. Even after Good Friday and Easter and right up to Ascension day they kept hoping for an earthly kingdom!

Maybe we share the same sorts of thoughts today. We are surrounded by so-called Christian churches that preach an earthly kingdom of God. So many churches today are often judged by their contributions to their communities, and so they preach “Deeds, not creeds!” The thought is that it doesn’t matter so much what you preach in the pulpit, but rather what you do for your neighbor. And so the idea behind many churches is that *“If we can all get together and work together, we can make this world a wonderful place to live in.”* But it’s a goal which cannot be reached in this world, because we live in world of sin. Then there is the false doctrine of the Millennialists which—even after seeing these mistakes of the disciples and Jesus’ constant correction that he was not interested in an earthly kingdom— even after all this, the Millennialists still claim that Jesus is, in fact, going to come back and finally set up an earthly kingdom and reign for 1000 years together with believers. And that’s just not going to happen. Then there are those that claim that Jesus wants you to be happy! That Jesus promises that if you follow him, you will have a happy, rich, fulfilling life in the here-and-now, and that’s His goal for you.

While we might generally reject all of those ideas, all too often we also get hung up on the physical amenities of this life. We get all too frustrated when our lives are lacking in earthly comforts. How often, when things go poorly for us, do we start thinking, *“I’ve got to get right with God so he’ll turn things around in my life...”*? When we do this, we’re just dumbing Jesus’ life’s work down to merely being about creating an earthly paradise for us in the here and now. But Jesus says, ***“My kingdom is not of this world.”***

The main theme of God’s Word has to do with something much more important and lasting than any earthly prosperity: *eternal salvation*. The Lord has saved us from the only thing this world has to offer: a kingdom of disappointment and death and sin. To do it, He gave His only Son, Jesus. The perfect life

that God demands, and that we could never live—Jesus lived, in our place. The huge payment for our sins that God demands, and that we could never pay—Jesus paid, in our place.

So how did Jesus reply to these disciples? Well, He didn't scold them for asking a stupid question; He let them down easy **"He said to them 'It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.'"** Jesus knew that very soon they would have a much better understanding of these things. Why? Because in ten days, it would be Pentecost. **"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."** With these words, Jesus revealed their assignment—and ours!

"You will receive power," Jesus said. I remember when I first taught my older sons about static electricity. We were at a park in Lakeland, and they had been sliding down the slide, and one of their heads of hair was standing on end. I knew what was going on, so I told him to reach out his finger, and I touched it with mine, and he was shocked. Then I did the same to his brother, and of course then the next thirty minutes consisted of them taking turns down the slide and poking each other and me and their mother, delivering that satisfying shock as many times as they could.

The disciples were also charged up, not with static electricity, but with the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit. And what did that power entail? It's exactly what Jesus said, **"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."** All you have to do is read through the rest of the book of Acts to see the Apostles, charged up by the Word of God, delivering the life-giving jolt to the rest of the world. They did so by bravely proclaiming Jesus Christ as Savior in love for God and their fellow man.

We, too, have been charged up with that same power. And like my boys felt they had to do, we also must go and touch as many people as we can. Because we have been jolted out of our former lives of ignorance. We have been jolted awake from the deep dark death of unbelief. We know the facts of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection; and we know the promises connected with those events. We have received the promise, **"Because I live, you will live also."** (John 14:19) We have come to realize that without being jolted awake like this, we would have gone through life blind and then spent eternity in the darkness of hell.

But having been given faith in Christ as our Savior, we have received the life that lasts forever. We have been given the key for putting all of our earthly life into perspective. We have been given a hope that will not disappoint. And if God has so gifted each of you, can you keep that to yourselves? It's impossible! Jesus says that you too are His witnesses. When He was ascending into heaven, He wasn't leaving the world high and dry. He was leaving you and me to continue in the work that He'd completed. And He was sending the third person of God, the Holy Spirit, to help us in our work so that we can effectively and boldly **"Proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light."** (1 Peter 2:9)

Picking back up with verse 9. **"And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes..."** This always struck me as a humorous scene. We can picture the surprise of the disciples as Jesus begins to rise slowly into the clouds. Here are all these men,

standing around in a circle, staring straight up into the sky with their eyes wide and their mouths open—they must have looked kind of silly! Pretty soon somebody looks around, and notices that there are two angels standing there.

On this day of “famous last words,” the angels, too, had something very important to say. They said, ***“Men of Galilee, 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.”*** The importance of these words is obvious: they are a promise of Jesus’ future return.

Like those disciples, we labor under a certain disadvantage in this world. The most important Person in our life, the Person on whom we depend for everything we want and need, the Person who holds our life in the palm of His hand—we *can’t see*—at least, not physically; not with our eyes. And we won’t see Him physically until He returns. But that doesn’t mean He’s not here, of course! In fact, we know that He is here with us right now, because He said, ***“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.”*** (Matthew 18:20) While we are in this world, Jesus continues to be with us, every time we are ***“gathered in His name.”*** That is, every time we read His Word, every time we receive Holy Communion, and every time we baptize, even babies. Because those are the things that God promises to be present with and to work through. These are the things through which Jesus promises to be here, so we don’t need to stand here gazing up into the sky looking for Him to return. Because we have been equipped with the life-giving means through which God promises to operate and be present with us to bless our work.

But He also does promise that He will return. That’s one of the big promises of Ascension Day. Just as the disciples saw Him go up into heaven, God promises we’ll all see Him coming back. On that last day, you will recognize Your Savior—you’ll know Him by sight. And He will take you to enjoy the eternal fruits of salvation which He earned for you. And if in the meantime you grow tired, and if the twists and turns of daily life start to weight you down, look to Jesus where He says He will be: in His Word. And remember what He promises: the day is coming, it will be here soon! He will come to deliver you from this valley of sorrows to take you to Himself in heaven.

And when that happens, what will your last words be? Have you ever thought of that? It’s hard to say with any certainty what our final words will be, simply because none of us know when those words will be spoken. We don’t know if it will be a month from now or a year from now or eighty years from now. But we do know this: whenever it is, because of Christ our risen and ascended Lord, we will be able to say with certainty that we will be with the Lord. We will be able to use our last breaths to confidently say together with Job, ***“This I know, that in my flesh, I shall see God.”*** (Job 19:26) May God grant that each of us are ready for Him when that day comes.

Come quickly, Lord. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.” (Phil. 4:7)