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Sermon Series: *Meeting the Risen Jesus*, No. 4

**Believe What He Promises You**

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**Acts 1:6-14 [NIV]**

*Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"*

*<sup>7</sup> He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

*<sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.*

*<sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."*

*<sup>12</sup> Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city.*

*<sup>13</sup> When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.*

*<sup>14</sup> They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*

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Would you turn back to Acts, Chapter One, with me?

I've been thinking this week how every person in the world falls somewhere on what might be called a "continuum of curiosity;" different people have different levels of interest – different levels of curiosity – about things they don't know.

Over here you have the person who simply believes whatever they're told. They never question much of anything, even if they don't understand it – and maybe especially if they don't understand it. They just accept that the issue is beyond them, and they're fine with that; they're fine not chasing down explanations of complex circumstances or problems. These are the people who just take things as they come, and who don't seem to need to know any more than they do in order to live "happily ever after."

Proponents of that sort of demeanor or approach to life might call it "contentment" or even a life of "faith."

Detractors toward that approach to life might call it "gullibility" or "simplistic" or even "irresponsible."

So, imagine that as one end of the "continuum of curiosity."

And then on the other end are those persons who have more than a strong desire – let's say an absolute drive – to know and to understand to the furthest degree possible even those things that are the most mysterious or difficult. These are people who do not just accept that which seems fuzzy or complex – they want to do all they can to comprehend and sort an issue to the point that they feel they've mastered it.

Proponents of that sort of thinking call it "responsible," or "informed;" even "necessary for progress."

Detractors, however, might say those people depend too much on their own understanding, or that they "walk by sight and not by faith."

Imagine those as the extreme ends of the continuum, onto which all of us fall – somewhere. Most of us are probably somewhere in between those two far ends, and our position most likely depends on the topic or issue at hand.

The point is that we all approach mystery, or that which is unknown to us, in different ways, including the central event of today's Scripture text: what we call the *ascension of Jesus*.

I don't remember ever hearing, or preaching, a sermon about Jesus' ascension. In fact, most of us probably zip right over this event as we read the Bible. If anything, we consider it little more than a footnote to the whole of the resurrection account.

And yet, Jesus' ascension was apparently quite important to the early church, such that when those earliest Christians spoke or wrote of His resurrection, they almost always included His ascension in the account.

An example of that is Peter, who included the ascension when he:

spoke at the election of Matthias,  
and also in his words on Pentecost,  
and also at the healing of the lame beggar.

You also notice that the ascension made it into the Apostle's Creed – the church's earliest creed. For something that uses only a little over 100 words to describe Christianity, an investment of 14 of them in the ascension is significant.

But you might ask, what's the big, mysterious issue about it? Jesus is there with His disciples on the Mount of Olives. He seems to rise up into the sky, and He's gone.

Like a helium balloon would do, right?

What's so hard about that?

Well, the question is, where exactly did Jesus go?

I mean, we know what happens to a balloon. A balloon will rise up and up and up until the pressure difference causes it to pop, and then the skin falls back down to earth somewhere.

So, we know where that helium balloon goes, eventually.

But where, exactly, did Jesus go? That's where all this gets interesting, at least to me.

You see, if we bring together Luke's accounts of this in both His gospel<sup>1</sup> and here in Acts, Luke says that Jesus was taken "up into Heaven."

<sup>1</sup> Luke 24:51

The Apostle Paul says something similar. He tells the Ephesians that Jesus ascended far above all the heavens.

Mark, Chapter 16, also says that Jesus was taken up into Heaven, but He says more: he adds, “where He sat down at the right hand of God.”

Peter, later on in Acts, repeats this, preaching that “Jesus needed to be exalted to heaven.”

So, when you put all these reports together, and you combine what they say with the prevailing belief of Jesus’ day that the earth was flat and that there were two realms to creation—the heavens above and earth below—well, this image begins to form that says that Jesus, much like a balloon or a cosmic space-man, went up and up and up into the clouds and eventually, up there, somewhere, in Heaven, landed at the right hand of God.

And, of course, that is where you get what have become even in our day the very popular images of Heaven being a place way up in the clouds, with angels and harps and God the Father looking down on the earth, and so forth.

That is the popular conception of Heaven, even in our culture and even though we know about space and that the earth is round and all that. Still, most who believe in Heaven believe God is in the clouds somehow, and that is where we go when we die—where we get our wings and where we lie around and play harps all day.

And yet, if you do a little Biblical investigation, you find that that is not at all what Scripture says about the place we go when we die, or the place Christ-followers will spend eternity.

The Scriptural idea of where we’ll spend eternity is consistently that of a new earth, redeemed and restored and joined together with a new “heaven,” the Bible says, under the final and absolute rule of God. The Bible talks about a new capital—the New Jerusalem, with actual streets and rivers and buildings and things like that.<sup>2</sup>

So, what is this “Heaven” where Jesus went—and where followers of Christ go when they die, until Jesus returns and we all wind up occupying the new, restored, redeemed “heaven and earth” that we see there in Revelation 21?

Well, we get a couple clues from Jesus Himself.

In Luke 16, in His story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus called that place “Abraham’s side,” or the “Arms of Abraham.” Some of you recognize the term, “Abraham’s bosom,” and by those words, He seemed to be describing that place where God is—and where those who’ve lived lives faithful to God are at peace and rest in death.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus also called that place “paradise” in His conversation with the repentant thief on the cross beside Him. In fact, Jesus said the two of them would be in that place together and on that very day, which we presume to mean at their point of death.

But what is, or where is, Abraham’s side and paradise?

Now, if it hasn’t already, this is where that continuum of curiosity comes in, because some people,

frankly, don’t care or don’t want to even think or talk about this.

That may be because it genuinely doesn’t matter to them—they’re happy to let God work it out however He wants.

And that’s just fine.

The truth is, God’s going to do it His way anyway, whether we know it or agree with it or not.

Others may not want to talk about this stuff because it has the potential to mess up their conception of Heaven—they like the angels and harps and clouds and the promise of wings and all that—and they don’t want their balloon popped.

But for those who notice the discrepancy and have wondered about these things—maybe even for years, let’s press on and think about this a little bit.

And let me say, we do so while realizing that there’s a lot of mystery to all of this—so nobody’s going to die on these hills, OK? Within the framework of faith, there’s lots of room for discussion and wonder here.

But one actually rather old idea that fits the Biblical account quite well is thinking of Heaven as another dimension of reality that we really cannot see and cannot yet fully participate in—a whole other dimension of reality that is, more or less, hidden from us for now.

Think about Heaven as God’s space—God’s domain—God’s reality, while creation as we see it is ours, for now.

When we expire, when we die, those who have followed Jesus then gain access to, in spirit, God’s space—this other dimension—such that they are with God in paradise, which is anyplace God reigns.

But we also realize, though, that the eventual plan is to bring the two spaces—the two dimensions—together, or maybe I should say, back together, as they were in Eden, where God was easily accessible to un-fallen humanity.

If heaven is God’s space, then that means that, at Jesus’ return, the dimensions of Heaven and earth (our space for now) merge and become, once again, a space and place where God’s ways and order are honored and respected, and where God is worshipped and creation is returned to the way God intended it to be—united and whole and pure—and where God can again have personal, intimate fellowship with all He’s made, which was His intention from the beginning.

It’s the reconnection of all dimensions of reality.

Are you following me?

This idea about Heaven also helps explain the strangeness of Jesus’ post-resurrection body and appearances, you see?

Every time Jesus showed up after His resurrection, His disciples had trouble recognizing Him. Why was that?

And beyond that, it seems He could appear and then disappear at will. He could pass through walls and doors and other earthly limitations.

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 21

<sup>3</sup> Luke 16:19-31

Yet, at the same time, He could eat and drink and show Thomas the scars on His hands and side.

You see, if we think about Heaven as not another location up in the sky somewhere, but instead as another dimension of God's reality here, we can more easily see how Jesus was the first one, not just to overcome death, but to be able to have a home in both the heavenly and earthly dimensions, which makes Him not only the firstborn from the dead, but also the first citizen of the re-created, reunited heaven and earth.

Now, He sent His Spirit to be with us in our dimension, so His presence on earth can be multiplied and so be even more powerful and effective for now.

But you know, people still report seeing Jesus, especially as they themselves get close to death. And so maybe this is why.

And maybe this is also why God says time and again that He is far nearer to us than we realize.

And maybe this is also why Jesus was able to tell us that He'll never leave or forsake us – because the dimensions of heaven and earth are far closer than we think.

Now granted, for the most part, Jesus, it seems, remains in the heavenly dimension, along with those who die in Him, until again the day comes when Heaven and earth are renewed and reunited. Then, Jesus will, once again, become the central figure of both dimensions.

You see, I think the point of the recording of the ascension event was to mark the point in time that Jesus' personal earthly ministry ended, and as the perfectly obedient son of God, He was exalted, which means He left our dimension and entered fully the dimension of Heaven.

That needed to be marked, because points in time are important to us.

Jesus came into our dimension of reality at a point in time, on a night in Bethlehem.

Jesus began His earthly ministry at a point in time.

Jesus was killed at a point in time.

Jesus was raised by God the Father at a point in time.

And Jesus returned to the Heavenly dimension at a point in time. And He returned as the first and only person, so far, with the ability to cross from dimension to dimension – to cross between both sides of God's reality.

And, at a point in time (we're told "in the fullness of time"), which apparently means some time in the future that is for God and God alone to decide, the promise will be fulfilled that Jesus will cross dimensions again – this time with the armies of Heaven, and He will subdue this rebellious creation of God's, and there will be a battle, and Jesus will win that battle, and His victory will bring heaven and earth together once again.

That's what we refer to as the Second Coming of Jesus, and that is the promise that has been, as N.T. Wright says, "hanging in the air" throughout all of Christian history.

It's the promise that's referred to, not just by these angels here in verse 11, but also in dozens of Scriptures.

The Apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God."<sup>4</sup>

The writer of Hebrews tells us how, "Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."<sup>5</sup>

John, in Revelation, declares, "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him."<sup>6</sup>

Jesus describes the event Himself – particularly in Matthew and in John.

Peter's second letter warns us about how "...the day of the Lord will come like a thief."<sup>7</sup>

And Jesus adds to that as well, reminding us that "the day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only."<sup>8</sup>

And so, our response to this promise of His to come again should be, as Jesus says in Matthew 24, "we must be ready."<sup>9</sup>

Ready to see this promise fulfilled.

We need to be ready, personally, with regard to our relationship with Jesus.

Ready to admit that He is, not just the Savior – but also the Lord.

Ready to make Him our Lord – the Lord of every part of our lives.

Which means we have to be ready to listen and obey His commands, to live as He calls us to live.

And, we have to be ready to take our part as His followers in His mission:

- to go where He sends,
- to do as He says, and
- to receive what He gives.

And that's all because we choose to believe what He promises: to believe that one day He'll come back and the earth will be recreated, and God's space and our space – Heaven and earth – will be reunited, and all reality – all of God's creation – will be one again.

You see, we all know that things here on earth are not as they should be – due to humanity's pride and self-exaltation. We don't have to be convinced of that.

Yet God has not left us. In fact, He is closer than we realize.

In Jesus, our world saw God live and breathe and exist even in its broken and limited dimension.

But one day, we will see Him in that reuniting of dimensions – in a restored world where Heaven and earth are once again as they were in the beginning, where God roamed the garden, and where God walked and lived with His people.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 9:28

<sup>6</sup> Revelation 1:7

<sup>7</sup> 2 Peter 3:10

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 24:36

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 24:44

That is the promise, and we have to be ready for the fulfillment of that promise, you see?

That's what the angels were trying to tell the disciples as they stared up into the sky.

Standing and waiting and wondering isn't what Jesus said to do.

To be ready for the fulfillment of the promise of His return means to do as Jesus said: to receive the gift He would give, and then, in the power of the Spirit, to give ourselves to making disciples – to making more followers of Jesus – both nearby and far away.

The fact that the disciples actually listened to Him is the proof that they believed this promise that He would return and bring heaven with Him.

And the same is true for us.

Will we believe the promise?

And will we actually live like we believe it?

Those are the questions we all have to answer.

It strikes me that even here in the elements of the Eucharist we see the blending of these two dimensions.

This is a simple piece of bread, if you can even call it that.

But this is also, remarkably, the body of Jesus Christ.

This is juice.

At the same time, this is also the blood of our Savior.

Two dimensions of reality, coming together.

When we take these into ourselves, we are not only identifying ourselves as followers of Christ. We are also declaring that we not only believe, but we are actually participating in the promise of a reunited creation – of heaven and earth as one.

And we're committing ourselves to living our belief – our trust in the promise of what's to come.

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending*

Benediction

The angels asked the disciples there, "Why are you looking into the sky?"

That sounds very much like what the angels asked the women at the tomb, "Why are you seeking the living among the dead?"

Obviously, Jesus wants us to walk with Him – and to understand His ways as they unfold.

But being one step behind Him, as it seems the disciples always were, isn't so bad – so long as we follow Him just that closely.

Let us go from this place, knowing that we, as we are in Christ, and as His Spirit is in us, are closer to Heaven than we think. Let us rest, and also rejoice, in the fact that our God is near, and that one day soon, He will be nearer still.