

Ascension

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. It's great to have you with us today. My name is Graham. I'm the pastor here at the church. And let me encourage you to grab your Bibles and please turn with me to Acts chapter 1. It's where we're going to be today. Maybe worth having a finger in Psalm 24 that was read earlier to us as well. As we come to this, the penultimate sermon in our short little series that we've been in over the last few weeks, thinking about and looking at the defining moments in Jesus's life. And just as we begin today, let me tell you about the last date night that my wife and I had before the lockdown. So I managed to get us tickets to go and see The Lion King when it was on at Edinburgh Playhouse.

Now, I don't normally do musicals, not really my thing. But even I came out of that thinking, boy, that was a spectacular show. So let me encourage you, if you get the chance to see it, go and see The Lion King, you'll absolutely love it. But I'm guessing that if you haven't seen the musical, there's a good chance that you've probably seen the film. Now, being a Disney film, it's not the most complicated of plots. It really revolves around one question.

And the question is, who is the rightful king? Right? So that's the question that dominates the storyline of The Lion King. And as the story unfolds, you begin to see that it really matters who is on the throne. What they are like really matters. How they got there really matters.

And what they do with the power that they have as they rule really matters as well. You see, it really matters who's on the throne. And now let me take you from the realm of Disney to the realm of real life. Because if you're anything like me, there's two questions that perhaps are in your mind as you come to church today. And as you live your life in a world trying to do its best in the middle of this pandemic, but where it increasingly feels like we're a bit like we're on a runaway train. And I'm asking myself the question, is there anyone who's in control of this? And at the time when the stories of our lives, the narratives that we try and live by, the things that we pour our energies into, a time when those things have never looked so shaky, I'm asking myself, is there a bigger story to life? One that's bigger, one that's going somewhere, one which you and I are part of and that we find ourselves in. And what these verses from the Bible today tell us is that there's a yes to both of those questions. Yes, there is somebody in control.

And yes, there is a bigger story which you and I are part of. And there's a yes to both of those questions because there is a rightful king of the world who we're going to meet today in these verses whose name is Jesus. And so hot off the back of Easter, we pick up the story about Jesus in the book of Acts. Now, Acts is written by this man called Luke, this doctor come historian who has written his account of the life of Jesus. And what I love about Luke's gospel is that he is so explicit as to why he wrote it. And you'll see it in verse one of Acts one. You see, Luke's slightly being commissioned by this man called Theophilus, who wants to know for certain who Jesus is as he wrestles with the question in his mind. Is this man worth following with my life? And you see, the thing is, is Luke has researched Jesus. And as he's considered what his facts are telling him, that what the conclusion that

[4 : 04] Luke has come to is that Jesus most certainly is, as he sees the promises and the purposes of God in history fulfilled in the life of this man, Jesus. And if Luke is almost like part one of his account, which records the events up until Jesus's resurrection, Acts is almost a bit like the sequel where Luke writes about what Jesus continued to do. So this is where we are in the story.

Jesus has risen. We thought about that last week. We thought about how Mary Magdalene has become the first witness to the risen Jesus. And notice Luke telling us at verse three that Jesus didn't just shoot straight up to heaven after he appeared to Mary Magdalene.

Right? Really important that we see that. Because here's what would have happened if that were the case. Mary would have run ecstatically and told everybody that Jesus is alive. And they would

respond and say to her, can anyone back that up? And she would have said, no, not really. And so they would have concluded, well, we don't think he did rise from the dead. Mary would have come back and said, well, yes, he has. I've seen him. They would have come back and said, no, he hasn't. She would have come and said, oh, yes, he has. And not only do we have on our hands the original and the most boring pantomime in history. But what we have is what they call the knots and crosses, a cat's game.

Right? I don't know why they call it that. It's just what they call it. A cat's game. Deadlock. Game's over. And the news about the risen Jesus never even gets up off the ground. But Luke tells us that Jesus appeared over a period of 40 days. Do you see that? To many different people. What was he doing? He was proving and he was speaking. In fact, we know from elsewhere in the Bible that Jesus appeared to over 500 people at one time. So in terms of the eyewitnesses, you have the breadth in terms of the number of people and you have the length in terms of the number of days, which together come together to form pretty conclusive evidence for the risen Jesus. Now, let me hit you with a little factoid at this point. I don't know if you knew this, but actually we have more evidence for the resurrection than we do evidence for the fact that Julius Caesar even existed. Now, what does that tell us? It tells us that Christianity rests on a bedrock of verifiable facts, reliable facts. Maybe that's something that you've never really thought about until today. What is this Christianity business?

What is it based on? Well, it's based on facts. Our faith rests on facts. Maybe you need to check that out for yourself. And 40 days have passed since Jesus rose and he's about to ascend into heaven.

[7:11] And if you look at it, his disciples ask him, verse six, they say, is now the time for you to restore the kingdom? There's their question, right? In other words, is now the time for you to become the earthly king? Is now the time for you to set up your kingdom here? And Jesus says, no.

And he tells them that they will soon be living in the gap, right? Between his first coming, his going, and we'll think about this next week, his return. And the time of the GAP is the time that we will know as the GPA. It is the gospel proclamation age. As these disciples become his witnesses, and as they take the news of the risen Jesus to the peoples of the world, and Jesus ascends into heaven. And so in the time we have remaining, I just want us to see two reasons why the ascension is so significant. And so here's the first reason why this is so significant a moment.

Firstly, because it tells us that the king is on his throne. Now remember those words of Psalm 24. If you've got it there, then open it up in front of you. Here's the questions of Psalm 24.

Who will ascend the hill of the Lord? Who will stand in his holy place? In other words, who can qualify to enter God's presence? And these aren't rhetorical questions.

You see how the Psalm gives us the answer. Answer, the one who has clean hands, and the one who has a pure heart. And we respond to that, don't we? Not by saying, grab your backpack, we're going up the hill. No, we respond by saying, that is not us.

[9:17] That is not us. But it's a Psalm that throws us back, not to look at ourselves. It's a Psalm that throws us to look at Jesus. The one who came down and lived a perfect life of obedience to his father and finished his kingly work, the work that his father gave him to do of rescuing sinners from the gates of hell for his father on the cross. The final cry of Jesus on the cross. It is finished.

He did it. And truly he is the Lord's mighty in battle. And because of that, here he is entering heaven's course as the conquering king. You see, the ascension is about the homecoming of the king of glory. As Jesus takes his seat on the throne at the right hand of his father in heaven, in this the most glorious of moments. And the thing for us to see is this is where he is right now, ruling and reigning all things in that position of ultimate power. Here is Jesus in all his glory.

And so the question we have to ask ourselves is, have we caught a big vision of the king of glory?

Are we resting in this king's victory? My wife and I spent some time in Malawi in 2012. Again, if you've not been to Malawi, a beautiful part of the world, if you get the chance, do go.

But we got there and I remember speaking to some of the local people and I'm asking them about their ruler, right? About their president. Because while the majority of Malawians were living in poverty, he was traveling about in either his \$8.4 million private jet or one of his fleet of 60 Mercedes cars. In fact, when the guy died, they found bags stuffed full of American dollars in his room.

[11:37] This was their president. What kind of king is Jesus? What's he doing in the place of power? What is he doing in the place of all authority?

Well, the answer that the Bible gives us incredibly is that he is interceding for his people. That's what kind of king Jesus is. He's given himself for us. He has loved us. He has atoned for our sin. He has brought us to himself. And that's how we can ascend the hill of the Lord.

And that means that as far as God is concerned, that if our trust is in Jesus, if he is our savior and king, then the jury is not out on us. We are adopted as his sons and daughters.

And we're not adopted into God's family and then put, if you like, on probation period. God's saying, you can come in for just now. We'll put you on a six month trial and we'll see how it goes after six months if you can live up to this billing. No, because we are in Christ, the father loves us in the same way that he loves his son. And in the same way that the high priest in Israel wore the names of the 12 tribes of Israel on his heart, symbolic for the people of God as he came into the very presence of God. So the Christian has a great high priest who, as the song goes, ever lives and pleads for us in God's very presence. Do you know what that means? That means on my best days when I'm on top of the world and on my worst days when not just has life sucked, but I know myself that I have sucked. On those days, I derive my identity from this, that Jesus has loved me, that I'm forgiven, that I am free because I am his. Friends, let me ask you, are you resting in the king's victory? And are you displaying the king's rule? Do you know what the word is that causes the most fights in our house? It's the word mine, right? Our kids do it. I mean, they compete over everything, cereal, bowls, cutlery, seats at the table, and that's just dinner time.

But the honest truth in our home is that the adults do it just as much, if not more, than the children. Right? This is my time. It's time for my show. It's time for us to live my dream.

[14:20] I find that in your life that the word mine comes so naturally to you. And yet, do you see how we follow a king whose central confession in his life was not my will be done, but your will be done? And so in response to his love for us, in response to where he is, do we as his children increasingly demonstrate his kingship over every single area of our lives?

As we live holy lives? If you look at this psalm and knowing that Jesus fulfilled it, friends, do we strive to reflect it?

The ascension means that the king is on his throne. And secondly, the ascension means that the spirit is in our hearts. See at verse 4 of Acts chapter 1, what does Jesus say to his disciples?

He encourages them to wait. Right? Imagine how difficult that must have been, given that they've just seen the risen Jesus, to wait. But this is what he says. They have to wait.

And not just to wait randomly for something. They have to wait for the promise of the Father. Now, what's this all about? Well, here's some words of Jesus that Luke records at chapter 11 of his gospel.

[15:48] And in the context, Jesus is trying to help his disciples fathom something of the goodness of their heavenly Father. And this is what he says. This is his line.

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?

In other words, he's saying, you wouldn't do that, would you? If you have children, you wouldn't promise them something great and then flip it round when they came for it and play a little cruel trick on them.

Right? I heard somebody once say, it's like, son, here's an Xbox. Right? They open it up and they see that something used to be there. And now it's empty. See, son, I told you it's an Xbox.

He wouldn't do that. How much more would God never do that with his children? This is Jesus' point. Right? And he goes on. If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more, love that phrase, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

[17:03] You see, here's the gift of God. It's not stuff. What does he say? It's the Spirit. Given to God's people from the Father and the Ascended Son, the person of the Holy Spirit.

Now elsewhere you hear Jesus referring to him as the comforter. It's a wonderful phrase that, isn't it? As the comforter. As another helper. One who will be just like Jesus himself.

Because with Jesus not here, and this is what the disciples ask Jesus, and you totally get their logic here. Because when Jesus is not here, but he's up there, how can he be true to his promise that he will be with his people to the end of the age?

That's a great question. I mean, is that just wishful thinking? Is this some kind of motivational pep talk from a personal trainer? What's going on here? No, this is the promise of the Father.

The Holy Spirit sent to the disciples in the days following this, known as Pentecost, to live in the very hearts of all of God's people.

[18:17] As God the Father and God the Son really do take up personal residence in their lives through the indwelling Spirit. The Spirit who helps us in our weakness as God's children.

The Spirit who helps us to pray. The Spirit who helps us to understand more the deep things of God. The Spirit helping us in that lifelong project of pointing us to and making us more like Jesus. And specifically here, we see the Spirit helping the disciples to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. You see Jesus telling them there, verse 8, that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon them.

Power for what? He says it there. He's explicit. Power to be His witnesses. That's the power. They're to go. They're to testify to the risen Jesus.

I mean, what's the job of a witness? To simply say what you know to be true. That's your job. It's not to convince the jury. It's just to tell the truth about what you know to be true. That's the job of a witness.

[19:32] And they're going to be Jesus' witnesses. As they go, and as they proclaim, knowing and trusting that the Spirit will do His sovereign work.

And really, it's the only thing that explains how Peter, the man who crumbled when Jesus was arrested as he was interrogated by this little servant girl, all of a sudden you flip on a few pages in your Bible and you read an ax and you see Peter standing and boldly declaring the mighty ax of God and raising Jesus from the dead.

He's not scared. He's got courage. How? How have we gone from there to there? The only answer is the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit took this pansy and made him a preacher.

And so the book of Acts that starts in Jerusalem ends with this man called Paul giving testimony to the risen Jesus. Where? In the city of Rome.

The very heartbeat of the Roman Empire. And so here we are 2,000 years later. The message of the risen Jesus having reached and transformed even the people in Scotland.

[20:51] And so as we respond to this, let me encourage us to be thinking and praying on who we can be witnessing to. You know, let's not underestimate what the Holy Spirit can do through the power of everyday ordinary witness.

My favorite example of this is a man called John Wesley who is one of a number of people from the 18th century in the UK who God used mightily to reach countless numbers of people around the world for Jesus.

Man who preached to thousands of people. The man who interacted with some of the biggest brains in the world at the time. And do you know what he said was the most powerful witness to him growing up to the reality of the risen Jesus?

He said it was watching his mum in action. Just watching her do her thing, watching her go about her life, hearing what she was saying about how Jesus has transformed her life.

And he said this, he said, I learned more about Christianity from my mother than I did from all the theologians in England. Isn't that a wonderful truth about the power of the Holy Spirit through somebody who's just being a faithful word and deed witness for the risen Jesus?

[22:14] I hope that encourages you today. It encourages you as you speak to the neighbour on the street corner, keeping your distance, but speaking to them on the street corner. As you speak to that friend at the shop, as you love your family member, as you call them on Zoom this week, let's not underestimate what the Holy Spirit can do through the everyday Christian whose faithful life and words testify to the good rule of Jesus.

You know, maybe you're watching this and somebody's just flicked this link onto you and you find yourselves here. Why not ask them why they trust and hope in the risen Jesus? Wouldn't that be a great conversation to have today off the back of this?

So here's the ascension, this defining moment in Jesus' life. What does it mean? It means two things. It means that the king is on his throne and it means that the spirit is in our hearts.

You know, just as we close, let me just take you back to date night, okay? Let me take you back to the Lion King, this thing that we're watching. Let me take you back, if you know the film, let me take you back to what was the finale.

Remember the question, who is the rightful king? Here's your spoiler alert. The musical ends with the big finale. Simba takes his place as the rightful king, right? And all things are right again.

[23 : 40] And in an instant, all the animals are there, all the plants transformed to be lush and green. And the adult in you screams of only cultivating a garden was as simple as that. But it's a wonderful scene.

But here's the thing with Simba's reign as king. You know the film, the question he asked his dad as a child. He said, Dad, are we king over there? Right?

What about that shadowy place? And Mufasa replies, No, son. That's beyond our borders. We'll contrast that with the opening words of Psalm 24.

What is the Lord's? Where does he rule? Where does he reign? The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

In the words of Abraham Kuiper, former prime minister of the Netherlands who realized there was a king above him, he says this, There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, mine.

[24 : 56] And the question as we close is for you to think about whether you have surrendered your life to the rule of this good king.

Let me pray. And so, Father, we thank you that Jesus, the king of love, the king of glory, is on his throne.

Help us to respond rightly to his rule and in faith reach out and take great comfort not from how things look down here but from how things look up there, from who he is and from where he is and from what he will one day do.

Father, thank you that you love us. Thank you for this time this morning. Thank you that you hear our prayer because we make it in Jesus' precious name. Amen.