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# Rising up and Returning

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 17 May 2026 • Ascension

Acts 1:1-11 • Luke 24:44-53

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

What are we waiting for? We are waiting for Jesus to return. What will happen then?

The disciples were wondering this, as they watched Jesus' feet disappear into the clouds. You've probably heard of the church, I forget where it is, which has two plaster feet attached to the ceiling, to represent the last look the disciples had of Jesus as he ascended. This painting on the screen is pretty good too. These just follow the Acts reading today, where the disciples stood looking up as Jesus soared upwards through the clouds, and two men in white robes,

presumably angels, appeared beside them. They tell the disciples that Jesus will return in the same way, “coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30), as both Matthew and Mark tell us. This is an interesting echo of Daniel, who wrote, describing a vision he had:

I saw one like a human being  
coming with the clouds of heaven.  
And he came to the Ancient One  
and was presented before him.  
To him was given dominion  
and glory and kingship,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
should serve him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
that shall not pass away,  
and his kingship is one  
that shall never be destroyed.

(Daniel 7:13-14)

Daniel was clearly a prophet of Jesus, and his prophecy agreed with that of the two angels. If you're on the side of the angels, you're doing all right.

But what were our disciples thinking? This has been a busy time for them. Jesus has been tried and executed. Jesus has risen again and has appeared to them and many others over a forty-day period and has continued to teach them about the kingdom of God. Surely his teaching gained even more authority since the Resurrection. The Jesus they thought was gone forever is still with them, but now they see him leave them again. They could easily have thought that they were abandoned, except that Jesus told them, “Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). Clearly something else is coming to them — something wonderful. They will receive the Holy Spirit, which is the source of the power they will have. It is a continuation of Jesus' ministry, in another form, as he will be with them “always, until the end of the age” (Matt 28:20), as Matthew reports.

Look at how Jesus prepares them for this coming time, after he returns to his Father in heaven. Putting aside the three years of teaching through stories, parables and miracles, Jesus gives them quite a lot of information:

- From Matthew, we learn that Jesus has been given “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18)
- From Luke we learn that the disciples “will be clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49)

- From Acts, we learn that they “will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5), and that they will receive power, and that they will be Jesus’ witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8)

What will not happen, and what many of the people of Jerusalem have been longing for, is that Jesus will “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6). That is not his mission. He is concerning himself with a different kingdom. The disciples want Israel to be restored to self-government and prosperity; but what they will get from Jesus is “a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” This heavenly country will be theirs after their deaths through faith in Jesus, as God “has prepared a city for them.”

This is a recurring theme in the Bible. Remember John 14 from a few weeks ago? The many rooms in the Father’s house, and Jesus going to prepare one for each of us?

We are approaching the last act, if you will, in the Easter drama. We began with Ash Wednesday, walked with Jesus through Lent and to the cross, rejoiced when he rose again on Easter morning, watched him disappear up into heaven today, and next week we’ll receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It helps to think of all these events as one story — the story of God’s gracious salvation of his creation. Every step is necessary in God’s plan; else, it wouldn’t be there. God plans carefully and his plans bear fruit.

The true last act of this drama will be Jesus’ return on the clouds of heaven. Then we will, by God’s grace, join with him in eternal life. We have been given all the teaching we need for that to happen, not that we control these events; but God has high expectations of us, that we will remain faithful to him and his Son. When Jesus ascended to heaven, and when he comes again in glory, he will have successfully accomplished all that he needs to accomplish, all that his Father has requested of him, and we will be the fortunate beneficiaries of his success and his love. Thanks be to God.