

“The Ascension of the King” based on Acts 1:1-11

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on June 1, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

In 1982, a man gathered up some weather balloons, some helium tanks, his lawn chair, and a pellet gun. Then he decided to make a little homemade aircraft. He thought that with his weight, he might go 30 feet up or so. He miscalculated. He kept going and going and going.

Later that day, an airplane pilot called into air traffic control because they saw a man sitting on a lawn chair with balloons all around him 16,000 feet up in the air – twice the height that skydivers jump from. That’s more than three miles up in the air, obviously way more than 30 feet. Luckily, the for the man in his lawn chair flying as high as planes, the pellet gun worked. He started shooting balloons. So, just as he ascended, he slowly descended and landed safely, with the exception that he was caught in some power lines.

In our reading today, Jesus ascends, and Luke doesn’t give us an estimate of how high. There’s no mention of balloons, a lawn chair, helium, and certainly not a pellet gun. He is just enveloped by a cloud, high enough that the apostles seem to be looking up. Scholar NT Wright notes that he has seen medieval stained-glass windows which portray just Jesus’s feet sticking out of a cloud with the apostles are looking up from the ground. But is this an accurate portrayal of what happened?

I have heard some people theorize that Jesus was taken up in a spaceship. These alien Jesus theories often give me a chuckle, because they dismiss the divine, but are instead willing to create an equally unbelievable hypothesis. They will often point to a lack of data proving heaven exists and instead, they ignore the scientists who say there is no proof of life beyond earth.

I get it. This is a difficult story to understand. A story like the ascension of Jesus is a difficult one to understand. I cannot stand up here and say I can prove the ascension. I cannot stand up here and even say I can prove to you that heaven is real. Both are a matter of faith dependent on the testimony of those with experiences of God. Once again, faith is not a math problem to be solved in equations. Faith is rooted in the testimony of people who have experienced God and recognized God’s action in the world.

I believe in the ascension. I believe in heaven. I do so because of the testimony of the biblical authors. Luke is not an eyewitness, but he acknowledges that he is receiving and recording testimony. It was given to him, and he, himself, believes the testimony. We should not dismiss him because we are ignorant of his worldview. After all, if Luke were given something to read, like a description of our smartphones, social media, and the internet, he would immediately find that unbelievable. This is because he does not see the world as we do.

Comedian Nate Bargatze has a funny bit about him being sent back in time. He says, *“If I could go back in time tonight say to the 1920s, knowing everything I know now, I don’t think I would make a difference...I would go back and I’d see some guy on an old phone and I would be like, ‘Hey, eventually, they have phones that you, like, carry in your pocket.’ They’d be like, ‘Yeah? How do they do it?’ and I’d be like, ‘Phew, I don’t know how they do it. I think it’s a satellite?’ And they’d be like, ‘What’s a satellite?’ Oh, man I shouldn’t have even said that.”*

While Nate jokes about himself being dumb, he's not, even Steve Jobs would have failed if given the same task of going back to 100 years ago to explain his invention – the iPhone – and everything that is needed from the mining of materials to the discovery of the conductivity of silicon, to the invention of the microprocessor and more to make a smart phone possible. I am certain, he could not do it in just 11 verses with 262 words like the translation we read this morning.

We may assume that it is easier to go back, since that knowledge is part of our foundation, but there are a lot of unspoken things, changes in language, cultural norms, and more, which a reader contemporary to Luke would not need to be explained. But these are things which we are liable to miss, confuse, or take out of context. This is why we should be concerned when someone claims a plain reading of the text and says, "Don't argue with me – argue with the bible."

This is why both personal and public reading and study of scripture are necessary. We need to be humble enough to know our personal reading of scripture is best when it is enhanced by the history of the church, by the scholars (even secular historians), and each other.

From a modern viewpoint, many in the church say that heaven is beyond us, and many outside the church say that if it is beyond us, then it does not exist at all. In response, Christians will say that our disembodied souls can bridge the gap. When we die, our may bodies decay as material, but our souls go to heaven.

But the story which Luke tells is of Jesus ascending in his material body. The two men say he will come back in the same '*tropos*,' in Greek, meaning 'mode' or 'manner.' He's going up in a body and he's going to come back in a body. This implies that Luke and his witnesses, based on their experience seeing Jesus ascend, did not think he went to a spiritual world. They think he went somewhere that his body exists, with its nail holes and all.

This makes no sense to us, but it *does* make sense in the framework of the Hebrew scriptures. As scholar NT Wright again puts it, "*In scripture, from Genesis 1 onwards, heaven and earth are the twin halves of God's good creation. They are designed to interlock and overlap. They are made for each other. Scripture affirms repeatedly that they are designed, eventually, to come together as one.*"

Professor Wright, whose book, "The Challenge of Acts," undergirds this sermon today, has been the most influential theologian on me and on my faith journey. There are often undertones of his work in just about every sermon I give you. He says that this view of heaven and earth means that in the ascension a part of earth – Jesus's body – has now entered into heaven. This means Jesus becomes a temple – a meeting place of heaven and earth – within heaven, just as he had been the true temple in his life on earth.

Next week we will celebrate the Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes down to the apostles, and is poured out into the world on all flesh. This creates another kind of temple. The Holy Spirit fulfills a promise to live with humanity by living in and among us. This means that by his Ascension, Jesus rules over the world as its King, placing humanity within the divine realm, while by the Spirit, God lives in and acts through humanity – all of it – not just one nation, or select individuals.

The Ascension points to Jesus as the Messiah or Christ – the anointed King – over all the world. God entered our humanity, fully taking on our flesh, to be Israel's anointed King first. He was rejected

by his people and turned over to the nations – Rome. Indeed, the truest religion and the greatest empire ever known at that time could not handle him. They could not tolerate Jesus as he pushed back against sin and death. So, they utilized the power they had, the very same powers of sin and death, and they killed Jesus, attempting to shame him, by hanging him naked on a cross for all to see as he died an agonizing slow death. But what they meant for shame became his glorious throne.

As he was raised up on the cross by sin and death, so the Holy Spirit raised him from the grave. He defeated these dark powers, and in his Ascension, he brought our humanity into God's presence – into heaven. For the apostles, this was not just his spirit, but his body, scars and all. By his Ascension, the Holy Spirit could then be sent from the Father, through the Son, and to the world to begin the Triune God's new creation. This was not just in Jesus, but in all of humanity through the faithful.

Jesus, being fully God and fully human, now reigns from heaven in his human body. Again, it is strange and hard to really put our heads around. Yet, likewise, he reigns through his human subjects – us in our bodies filled by the Holy Spirit. It seems as if Luke and the New Testament writers see heaven as something that is present with us. Yet, heaven is also veiled, as if it is behind a curtain waiting to be revealed when it is pulled back and seen with us. Jesus as the temple and the temple of the church are access points. This is why throughout Acts the conflict is at temples.

Now, we may look out on the world and rightfully wonder, "How it could be that Jesus is really King?" There is still division and so much heartache. There is death and devastation. There is suffering and exploitation. Yes, this is true. Sin and death continue to do their worst to try to expel God's presence. We may long for a Christian strongman to be like the ancient Caesars. This ruler would empower friends and crush enemies so that Christians might feel safe because they feel as though they belong, with a purpose that is known and lived out.

But this is not the way of Jesus. No, the way of Jesus is the way of self-giving love as seen on the cross. It is laying down our lives, our identities and who we think we are to become, by the Holy Spirit, more like Jesus. He wants this to be the way of his followers and to be so in direct contrast to this type of ruler. Jesus says in Matthew and Mark that the rulers of the nations "exercise lordship over" their subjects. This means they subjugate people. He also says they "exercise authority over," meaning they dominate their people, but for his followers, this is not how they are to be. They are to be like Jesus, who came to serve, not to be served, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus wins the victory through the power of self-giving love, but it is not expedient – insert joke about how slow things move in the Presbyterian Church. Rather, the effect of self-giving love is transformative which takes time, and it is meant to reveal a new creation. Yes, there are many times that Christians sought power over others. There are many times Christians have violated the core of the faith. But despite that, the slow progress of love has changed the world.

In the 2000 years since Jesus, the world is a very different place compared to the 10,000 years of human civilization before. Historian Tom Holland has pointed this out in his book, "Dominion." He was not a person of faith at the time of writing and may not even identify as a Christian now, but Holland discovered in doing a history of Christianity, that most of what we would consider human

rights in our culture today were foreign concepts before a church proclaiming Jesus to create them. Keep in mind that even, “Thou shalt not kill,” was once revolutionary outside of Judea.

In Rome, a murder charge only came up depending on who the victim was. If you were a citizen, and the other person was not, you might go about your day, unless that person was another citizen’s property – an enslaved person, a wife, or a child. A charge may be pending then, but it could just be a property charge – even for taking a human being’s life. In most cultures today, murder is murder as we think of it. If you take another human life, you have committed murder. It’s wrong.

My point, and for that matter, Wright’s point as well, is not to point to an arc of progress, but to recognize that when we truly live as believers in the ascended Jesus as King, how we live has a ripple effect. Historically, those changes emanated from how Christians lived. We become someone who is building for Jesus’s Kingdom, for the new creation, when we advocate for the dignity of other people and when we respect the rights of others.

What’s more, the Holy Spirit works in all flesh, and works in us, whenever we act with self-giving love. You know what – likewise, in people we see acting with self-giving love, whether or not they are “believers” we still see the Holy Spirit at work in and through them.

Beloved, in the Ascension, this is what we celebrate. We celebrate the reign of Jesus over the entirety of creation and in him, a piece of this creation has already entered the heavenly realm, and through the Holy Spirit, the heavenly realm is active in and through us. They are intertwined.

With our worldview in 2025, it may be hard to grasp the physical realities of what Luke and the Apostles proclaimed, but nonetheless, the message is simple: Live as a subject of the King, who reigns, not only in heaven, but here on earth. We pray this every week in our services when we say, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

We may struggle to imagine the idea of a bodily ascension and therefore our own bodily resurrection, or a renewal of all things, but nonetheless, the message of this is simple too: The current creation matters. We don’t just do something that gets our souls into heaven so we can escape our responsibility here. What we do, how we live, the impact we make, will last into eternity. Every act of kindness you show now is some aspect of the Kingdom that will endure forever. Everything good and all love will be preserved in the new creation (see 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 for more).

How we live matters.

Jesus is our King. He is the Christ – the anointed King over all of creation. Let us be his loyal subjects, with selfless love, as creators for his Kingdom, and not ours. Let us reject the trappings of thinking we should seek power, domination, and subjugation. Instead, let us imagine that curtain being pulled back to reveal our King with us here always. We reveal this in how we live, what we do, and the love that moves through us. Remember, you are loved by the creator of all things, knows you by name, loves you for who you are, and fills your heart with love so it pours out from you into the world around us. Amen.