

## ***Now What?***

*Acts 1:6-14 – May 17, 2026*

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“Now what?” This is pretty much what we can imagine the disciples were thinking as they witnessed Jesus’ final return to God as described in this morning’s text from Acts. Known as the Ascension, this scene is both dramatic and poignant as Jesus’ final interaction with those closest to him during his three years of ministry on earth. According to the text, this scene takes place forty days after Jesus first appeared to them following his resurrection. Jesus has spent these forty days by providing “many convincing proofs” that he was indeed alive again and continuing to instruct them as to what would be expected of them as their time to continue the work Jesus had begun approaches. This unique event appears only in the Book of the Acts which the writer himself identifies as the second of two books he has written describing all “that Jesus did and taught from the beginning.” The Gospel of Luke is that first book and both are addressed to someone named “Theophilus,” which, we are to assume, is Luke’s sponsor in writing this work centering on Jesus and then on the adventures of his apostles, especially Peter and Paul, after Jesus’ ascension into heaven. This is a bit of a play on words though since “Theophilus” translates from the Greek as “God-lover.” So, it is apparent these two volumes are intended to provide a solid written record of the earliest days of the Jesus movement. The Ascension, as described in Verse 9, dramatically describes Jesus floating up and out of sight on a cloud, into heaven.

Admittedly, the Ascension is not that big of a deal in the Congregational tradition of which we are a part. This is most likely because the Ascension is not alluded to in Matthew, Mark and John. Instead, the “exaltation” of Jesus is referenced as his return to heaven where he is seated at the right hand of God and the exact timing of this is fuzzy at best. The distinction between the Resurrection, the Resurrection appearances and Jesus’ return to heaven is sort of all blurred together as part of the same extended miraculous experience. In other words, the Ascension as written about in today’s text is just one imaginative description of how Jesus finally made it back to heaven. As such, it takes its place alongside so many other stories of Jesus, his life and ministry, recorded so very many years after his death. In fact, the Book of Acts could have been written as late as 125 CE

thus making this account more than 80 years old when the author of Acts finally put pen to paper. Is it true? Honestly, I don't know and I honestly think our decision to be followers of Jesus does not depend on whether or not it is true. No, for me, the value of this story comes in what happens next as the disciples find themselves in a "Now what?" moment. One thing for sure, I am certain they were experiencing the full weight of Jesus no longer being physically with them beginning to take hold.

This next section is my favorite part of this whole story. Two "men in white robes" – notice they are not identified as angels so they must be some other kind of heavenly being – sort of appeared next to them as they were standing and staring up into heaven. This always reminds me of that prank some of us used to do when we were younger – like high school or college age. You would get a group of friends together – it didn't take many – and then just go someplace outside and stare up into the sky. Just stand there, looking up, maybe even gesturing with a pointed finger pointed skyward occasionally. The goal was to see how many other people would stop and stare up too trying to figure out what you were looking at. It was a sort of sophomoric social experiment to see how gullible other people could be. Sometimes, you could get a decent crowd looking up with you. It was sort of like a quiet flashmob kind of thing that didn't need any advanced choreography or music to pull off. Just a group of people willing to stand outside and look up – at nothing. You would do this until one of the people who stopped to look up finally asked, "what are we looking at?" And then one of the originators would say something like, "I have no idea" and then folks would catch on and walk away. Or, sometimes the originators would just get tired of standing there looking up and walk away. Like I said, very sophomoric. And yet, surprisingly fun for the originators.

This is always what I think about as I read this description of the apostles and then the two white robed men (why men? Different sermon.) appearing and essentially asking them, "what are you doing standing around looking up to heaven?" This brought them back to awareness and they finally walked back to where they were staying in Jerusalem. All the disciples were there and we even have a list: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas Bartholomew, Matthew, James, son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas son of James. There is also confirmation that Mary, Jesus' mother *and his brothers* (remember last week's

sermon!) were there too. They were all there and they were all thinking the same thing – *Now what?*

Well, a couple of things are immediately clear from this text. First, the white robed guys told them they are not just to stand around watching for Jesus. So, that must mean they are supposed to do something with all that they have experienced with Jesus, all they have learned from him and watched him do while he was on the ground walking with them and not floating away from them. They are to focus on their own lives if they are to figure out what it is Jesus wants, needs, expects them to do. In other words, the answers they seek are not in the clouds and not in their grief. Their answers lie ahead of them so forward they must go. In the following verses of Acts 1 we find Peter leading the disciples through the first steps of organizing to continue on with the work Jesus gave them to do. And then in Acts 2, Pentecost arrives and they receive the Holy Spirit empowering them for all the work awaiting them.

So, what can we take away from the story of the Ascension for ourselves in these nerve-wracking times in which we live? Sometimes we all feel like the disciples, standing out there on that hillside looking up at something that's floating away from us and we really don't want it too. Our way of life is not what most of us want it to be, what we expected it to be as wars rage and prices for everything soar. We have settled into an unfortunate pattern of cultivating the divisiveness we say we despise because we are all too ready to see the problems in other people while disregarding the things we all do wrong every day. Dear ones, the Ascension reminds us all to well that to live as followers of Jesus and lovers of God we are to engage with life each day as God would have us. We are to love God with all that we are and all that we have and we are to love the other as much as we love ourselves. We are to forgive as we want to be forgiven. And we are to acknowledge that we all need forgiveness. We all hurt people we love, too often without knowing or realizing it. This is why forgiveness matters. This is why listening carefully to others as we have conversations with them is vital if we are to live as the Beloved People of God we say we want to be. We must be honest with ourselves before we can ever be honest with other people and part of that whole enterprise is recognizing our own blind-spots. What about ourselves needs to be recognized in ourselves by us in order for us to stop looking to the heavens for answers that God has already placed in our hearts?

A key part of the Ascension story is one we haven't touched on yet but it is central to so much of why this story is foundational in other Christian traditions that put their emphasis on heavenly rewards over earthly responsibilities. After telling the disciples to stop gazing heavenward and start moving forward, they also tell them that Jesus will return to earth in the same way he just left. For some this anticipated return of Jesus from heaven has become the most important thing, too often the only thing they take away from this story. They get hung up on figuring out the when and the how, and not the work of love and compassion which was Jesus real mission, and the work he handed on to the disciples. Jesus' real message was not about floating away on a cloud to heaven (sounds a lot like the Rapture of the *Left Behind* books and movies, which is nowhere in the Gospels). It was completely about the importance of loving the other, of not judging others, of caring for the least of these as the most important thing the followers of Jesus should devote their lives to. This message totally focused on whatever the next life might be, a message often obscured and ignored by those who only worry about securing their entry tickets through the pearly gates, obscures Jesus. We lose sight of the truth that he was killed by the forces of Empire, forces running rampant in the world once again. In this story of the Ascension, its most valuable lesson is to remember to focus your gaze and your energies not on the clouds, but fully on the world around you, the world that needs you and all the talents God has blessed you with.

Now what? That, dear ones, is your question to answer for yourself. And never forget it is one you answer every day, whether you realize it or not. Amen.