

*“And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father.”*

Millions of Christians confess this about Jesus as part of the Nicene Creed. We are part of those millions. We confess that Jesus ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. But what does that really mean?

Let’s go back to the scene. Jesus gives his last instructions to his disciples and then lifts off from the ground and is taken higher and higher into the air. His disciples watch stunned and amazed. Especially on this Mother’s Day, we are invited to consider the impact this would’ve had on Mary. She had watched her Son die on the cross. Then, she received Him back—alive—in His resurrection. Forty days later, it’s another apparent goodbye. Suddenly, Jesus’ pairing His mother with John in a new kind of family makes even more sense, and speaks to the love our Lord had for His mother. But there the disciples stand, continuing to stare until Jesus is hidden from sight by a cloud. He appears to be gone.

To our 21<sup>st</sup> century minds this is edging toward science fiction. It’s hard to grasp, therefore, you might be tempted to not focus on it too much. When we think of people who can “take off,” fictional characters like Superman come to mind, because otherwise, things like this just don’t happen.

So it may surprise you that for the early Christians, the ascension of Jesus into heaven was no problem and was widely celebrated. Some of the earliest celebrations of the ascension were held in Bethlehem – in the cave where it is believed Jesus was born. For these Christians, the ascension was the high point of what God had come to earth to achieve. Jesus came from heaven and was born in Bethlehem, he died, he rose again to save all people, and then forty days after Easter he returned to heaven to ascend the throne. The early Christians had no problem in recognizing that Jesus was God and that after his humiliation and suffering to accomplish forgiveness and salvation, the grand conclusion to his work was to be seated at the right side of the Father in heaven. To be seated at the right hand of the Father means to be seated in the position of Prime Minister—in other words, the figure at the right hand is the one who actually does the work of governing. As Paul says, *“Christ rules there above all heavenly rulers, authorities, powers, and lords; he has a title superior to all titles of authority in this world and in the next.”* (Ephesians 1:21)

Now, for three or four centuries after Jesus’ ascension, the problem people had was that they found it hard to accept that Jesus was human—or to be more precise, that he was both divine and human at the same time. Councils met and creeds were formulated to make this clear. But it wasn’t easy to maintain that balance. Human reason suggests that it’s either one or the other—that Jesus was either God just disguised as a human being, or a very good man that God chose to use. But for the early Christians, the ascension meant

that Jesus went up so that he could be the ruler of the universe and that included earth and especially the church. Jesus was and is human and God. In Jesus, there was a crossing over of the heavenly and earthly.

These days, many people separate Jesus' humanity from his divinity (that is, if they think of him at all) and so there is a talk a lot about what kind of a man he is – compassionate, kind, accepting, friendly, gracious; a lot of talk about how he interacted with other people. There is a lot of talk about him being a companion and friend and the earthiness of Jesus, but the divinity of Jesus – that he is God and rules over all things, that all things and all people are subject to him – that is a something that most people outside the church think is way too weird—and it might be something believing Christians don't think about enough.

It appears that shift has taken place. The early Christians had difficulty talking to their culture about the humanity of Jesus, while we have difficulty talking about the divinity of Jesus to the culture in which we live.

What are we to make of Jesus going up into the sky? I'd submit to you that the first Christians were right; this was an essential part of Jesus' mission, not just a cool final scene. But Jesus going up and away seems contradictory to his final words recorded by Matthew, *"I will be with you always to the end of the age."* How do we reconcile Jesus' words with His actions?

First, we need to challenge the idea that where Jesus went is a completely different, faraway place. The New Testament writers tell us that Jesus' ascension ushered in a **new era** that will end when Jesus comes again. It's hard to find the right words to describe what this means, but here goes.

In this new era, the old has not yet completely disappeared and new has not completely come. Just like Jesus, who is both human and God, this is a both/and time. It is a time when heaven and earth cross over. Here's an example from Holy Scripture. Those who have died in Christ are in the heavenly realm, yes, and those living in Christ now on this earth can also share in the blessings of the heavenly realm. Paul writing to the Ephesians, said, *"In our union with Christ Jesus, he raised us up with him to rule with him in the heavenly world."* (Ephesians 2:6)

Taken at face value, the inspired apostle Paul is claiming that right now, in this life, through God's abundant grace, the Christian is not only raised with Christ to eternal life in the future, but is also seated with Christ "in the heavenly world" at the present time. In a mysterious way the heavenly world intersects, overlaps and intertwines with our earthly reality. We are already citizens of the heavenly world. So, on the day when Jesus ascended to heaven, He was entering a new dimension of his existence *so that he could be with every one of us at the same time no matter where in the world we might be*. To really get the point, I'll ask you to imagine, what if Jesus had stayed? What if He had stuck around instead of ascending? What if, to get Jesus, you would have to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem? What would that experience even be like? How long would the line be? How

much time would we each get to spend with Him? Do you see the practical implications of this? Because of the ascension, because Jesus entered a new dimension of His existence, all Christians everywhere experience the same quality of His presence—especially wherever believers gather around His transcendent gifts of His Word and Sacraments.

Jesus going “up” to heaven doesn’t mean that he is watching us from afar; absent, or uninvolved in what is happening to us. He has entered the heavenly realm that intersects with yours in order to touch your life directly—and this is something you experience at the Lord’s Supper.

Jesus is both the King of kings and Lord of lords and the one who comes to you in the simple bread and wine of Holy Communion. He comes to give you his body and blood and as He does that, you have a sense of the intersecting of the heavenly realm with your life. You have in your hands the body and blood of the supreme ruler of the universe who becomes part of you. You are joined to him as you eat and drink. At the table, the heavenly and earthly cross over.

You receive both the bread and wine and the body and blood of the Lord. You receive this gift in both a building located in Chester Township and a kingdom populated by angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, all our faithful loved ones who have died in the Lord. In this new era, the old has not completely disappeared and the new has not yet fully come. But at the Lord’s table, the new is breaking in. The ascended Jesus breaks in to make things new; to make you new.

And the time is coming when Jesus will return. As the angelic messengers promised, He will descend in a way that all people will see and sense. It will be the final moment of the both/and era. Perfect justice will fall on all evil. The King of grace will gather his redeemed children to himself. Every last word of promise—fulfilled. With the Church across time, let us pray: Break into our lives today, Lord Jesus. Break into our world, Lord, Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.