

There was this group that got together for a celebration every year. It wasn't a birthday party. That would change days of the week, and this gathering was held on a Thursday every year. Of course, hearing that, you know: Memorial Day or Labor Day are out, which always come on Mondays. Mother's Day and Father's Day don't fit, always falling on their set Sundays.

This celebration did have something in common, though, with family gatherings like Mother's Day, Father's Day or a birthday. There was one individual who was always the guest of honor at this gathering. But kind of unique: this guest of honor would always be the first one there – and the last one present. And really unique: Everyone would get to talk with him, but no one would see him.

Do you understand now what celebration I'm describing? That last bit of detail, which might have somebody scratching their head – “everyone talks with this guest of honor, but no one sees him” –, is what most clearly identifies the gathering. I'm talking about gathering to celebrate Jesus' Ascension Day.

There are descriptions that tell of Jesus' Ascension Day already being celebrated by Christians in the 1st century. This year's Ascension Day was this past Thursday – 40 days after Jesus' resurrection from death to life. One of the mother's here on Thursday night for soccer club, who is originally from Germany, asked me: Why is it that here in America there is no Ascension Day celebrations? In Germany, it's a national holiday – they get off work and everything. And while many in Germany simply use the day for outings, there's still evidence of the meaning of the day in a name they have for it: “Himmelfahrt” – heaven bound, or heaven trip/journey.

Here in America I just saw someone describe Ascension Day as the “forgotten” holy day. We'll use our gathering this morning to celebrate the significance of this event from our Savior's life: Jesus, God the Son, returned home - to heaven. We remember it. We take home encouragement, direction and comfort from it.

Acts 1 intro

[Show video clip – commercial “I'm already there.”]

I don't want to ruin the moment. The sentiment “I'm already there” is truly nice. It certainly can make someone feel a little better amidst separation. But it doesn't actually put him there; the father wasn't physically there with his family (in the video); they were still missing him. Of course, the end of the video shows him walking through the door, he's back home, and the empty space is finally remedied. Everything's great! But you know another time of separation is on the way. And eventually the day will come when they'll be parted long-term from him by death – if some other event in life doesn't push them apart prior to that.

I didn't intend this to ruin the thought of the song for you. I want, though, to highlight a reality that gives us so much more.

Think of the time you were the saddest in your life... or, when you faced the worst pain... Maybe for you that was at a time you experienced distress from suffering a daunting loss, or from facing immense uncertainty. [Pause] Do you have a time in mind?

You now have something concrete to which to attach this next truth. It is at just such times that this truth of our God is so precious and relevant.

We've got a better assurance than this (reference video). We have One who says "I'm already there," and it is literally true. We've got this guarantee: "I'm always there." Jesus is here.

Imagine being in the shoes of Jesus' disciples as he is getting ready for his ascension. He is about to return to heaven.

"But we're weak," someone must be thinking. And they were. Only days earlier the Eleven had run, Peter had denied, and Thomas had doubted. "We're confused." Oh yeah, they were. They still needed instruction and correction on the day of Jesus' ascension and beyond it. "We can't go it alone." "You won't have to – I wouldn't allow it," Jesus assures; "It never entered my mind. I'll be with you always. I promise."

As we turn our attention this direction, how hard is it to see the application? We're made of the same stuff as the first disciples. "We're weak." And it shows in the ways we've fallen to fear and to doubt. "We're confused." So much that we see in our world stirs questions. So much that we experience makes us sad; we hurt. It would be enough to leave you feeling down or hopelessly stuck in whatever "yuck" of life you're facing, if we were left to ... "go it alone."

"Look around and be distressed. Look within and be depressed. Look to Jesus and be at rest" [Corrie Ten Boom quote].

He is only "hidden from sight." But He is not gone. He remains here – with you – always.

And in the End you will see him come back visibly from heaven. He will come back for us; and we – his people through faith – will be with him forever.

Look to Jesus and be at rest.

Acts 1:1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach **2** until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. **3** After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. **4** On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. **5** For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." **6** So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" **7** He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. **8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." **9** After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a

cloud hid him from their sight. **10** They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. **11** "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Intro Luke 24

Kids and parents who were here on Thursday at our soccer night, you can't answer this first question. Ok? Everybody else:

[hold a cup sideways, so that they can see inside]

What do you see? No, not the cup. What do you see? What's in the cup? No, "nothing" is not the answer. There is something. Air. It's real. It's really important. Where would we be without it? But it's often forgotten. Why? We sometimes forget to remember what we don't see.

Jesus is here. You can't see him, but he's here.

Someone might ask: "If he ascended, how is he here? The answer is: His ascension to heaven proves something about him. It goes hand-in-hand with his resurrection from the dead. Who exactly is he? God. True God. So tell me: where is God – how many places? Everywhere. Jesus is here. Though we can't see him, he is here.

O how important that truth is to us!

But that brings us back to the example of the air. We don't see it, and often forget it. How often do we forget Jesus' presence with us?

My eyes get fixated on what I can see, whatever the problem happens to be. Seeing no one at my side to help, I feel: "I'm all alone"; "I'm in this alone..." What a tizzy I can work myself up into: frantic, anxious, exhausted.

Then, there's the tunnel vision that our sinful nature and our self-absorbed culture offer us. I go after what I think will immediately fill a craving, whatever it may be. That's what I desire in the moment, so I rush in, without a second thought of the One at my side.

Yes, Jesus knows every one of our failures to trust him; he knows every time we've turned off onto our own sinful ways. He is a first hand witness.

What does he do?

[Video shown, beginning at 2:18.] "You held out your arms... you never left – you never will."

We know our sin. It's always before us. We confess it. We are turned in faith to our Lord Jesus for rescue. God's message of grace, his undeserved love for us, is: His mercies are new every day, to forgive the sins of that day. He doesn't tire of us. There is no end to his mercy. Great is his faithfulness and love!

The sight of Jesus at his ascension reminds us of this.

Jesus was hidden from their sight. But - we hear in Luke - that wasn't until he blessed them. And he continued to bless them as he was taken up. His hands extended in blessing to his people have never been closed. He has never stopped sending us blessings from his hands. And the greatest of them is this:

"He always lives to intercede for those who come to God through him. He completely saves those who come to God through Him." Hebrews 7:25

Luke 24:44 He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. **46** He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, **47** and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. **48** You are witnesses of these things. **49** I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." **50** When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. **51** While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. **52** Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. **53** And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Intro to John 17

You know the kind of stuff that goes on in our world. I read this week about a man who lost everything. His financial assets all swept away. Then, his children – very dear to him – died in one of the tragedies of nature we so often see. He himself was struck with a painful, debilitating problem with his health. To hear the story told, you hear about how he faced the judgmental views of those around him: "Man, you must really have done something wrong, to have God treat you like this."

Well, that all on the table, here is what the man had to say. He was a believer like you and me. Here is what he longed for: "If only there were someone to arbitrate between God and me, to lay his hand upon us both ... so that God's terror would frighten me no more."

The pain or turmoil doesn't have to be to the same degree as his, in order for you to relate. Have you ever felt something like, something similar to the man? Insecurities pop up. You know the truth: the Lord says he'll never leave you or forsake you; he loves you with an everlasting love. But you still get those nagging doubts... is he mad at me? Is his love all used up? I could sure use someone's help here – who knows me, who knows God, who can talk for me, who can talk to me.

Today we've come face to face with the answer for our heart's longing.

“Jesus has gone through the heavens. He is eager for us to approach Him with confidence. He appears for us in God’s presence. He gives us mercy and grace in our need. So draw near to Him in the full assurance of faith. Fix your eyes on Jesus who is in heaven.” Hebrews 4:14-16,9:24,10:22,12:2

And to show how timeless – how timelessly important – this truth is... The man I read about this week who lost everything, he wasn’t from here in Fayetteville – the story wasn’t from here in the United States – it’s not an account about events from the past century, or even millennium. Did you figure out who the example is? Job (9:33-34). Job went on to say:

19 Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. **20** My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; **21** on behalf of a man he pleads with God as a man pleads for his friend. (ch.16)

Jesus was the answer to Job’s desire. Jesus is the answer to our same desires. This section of the Bible – as well as many others – reveals this.

Jesus was already at his role of speaking in our behalf during his earthly life.

And what does he ask for? He doesn’t ask that we be immediately whisked out of this world. That’s not God’s plan. We have a purpose here: he sends us into the world – to shine the Light, to share His truth, to declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness, who made us His people.

Listen in on his prayer for us: “protect them, as I protected them. I kept them safe; guard them, Father, from the evil one.” Jesus is praying about our eternal wellbeing. The Lord has made us holy by bringing us to trust in Him. And he prays that we remain holy. Jesus is praying that we would be kept in saving faith.

Listen. He guards and keeps us by this Word. Listen. He brings us joy by this same Word. Listen to the One who lives to speak for you.

John 17:11 Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name--the name you gave me--so that they may be one as we are one. **12** While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. **13** "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. **14** I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. **15** My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. **16** They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. **17** Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. **18** As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. **19** For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.