

If Jesus wants lots and lots of people to believe in him, why didn't he stay on this earth with his risen body and go on tours all over the world? Why didn't he hang around for years and years and show people his nail-marked hands and feet, as he did for the disciples? Well, one answer is: people who refuse to believe will not believe even if Jesus does physically show himself to them. They will just pass it off as an illusion or a trick.

But a more important answer for us is this: Jesus did not stay on this earth and spread the message about himself because he wanted to leave us with that great privilege. He wants us to be his witnesses, just as he told the disciples to be his witnesses.

He blesses us with the chance to go into every part of the world and tell others about him. And that's what we Christians do whenever we tell a friend or neighbor about him. That's what we do when we support this church with volunteer efforts. That's what we do with every dollar we drop in the offering plate, because it's used to proclaim Christ both here and all over the world. It is what we do when we quietly pray for missionaries before we lay down our heads at night.

Sometimes Christians get caught doing what the disciples did on Ascension Day: staring off into the distance, losing sight of Jesus' command to witness. God does want our eyes turned heavenward, but at the same time he also wants us to look out to this lost world and be his witnesses. Let's go and witness gladly, thanking him for the privilege.

A lesson from Acts, chapter 1:

I wrote my first book, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began doing and teaching until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After he had suffered, he presented himself alive to the apostles with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and told them things about the kingdom of God.

Once, when he was eating with them, he commanded them, "Do not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for what the Father promised, which you heard from me. For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they were together with him, they asked, "Lord, is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After he said these things, he was taken up while they were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight. They were looking intently into the sky as he went away. Suddenly, two men in white clothes stood beside them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here looking up into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

The Word of the Lord.

Because we cannot see Jesus with our eyes, Christians sometimes live as though he were not here at all. Since we cannot see Christ, the temptation is to treat our neighbor and even ourselves the way an irresponsible kid treats the house when mom and dad go on vacation. We start to think that because we can't see Jesus we can live however we want. We can treat others however we want. Maybe we can even treat Jesus' words however we want. Maybe we can brush some of his words aside once in a while and follow other voices instead.

But none of that is what the Holy Spirit made us to be. And none of that is how God wants us to live. The Holy Spirit buried those dangerous attitudes in the waters of our baptism and raised us to a life of faith. And as he did that, he gave us a whole new attitude. It is an attitude that cherishes all the astounding grace of God. It is an attitude that wants to glorify God in every way for everything God has done for us in Christ Jesus. It is an attitude that clings to every letter of his Word. God made us his own in Christ. And that's how we want to live, even while we do not see him.

A lesson from Colossians, chapter 2:

Therefore, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, by being rooted and built up in him, and strengthened in the faith just as you were taught, while you overflow in faith with thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, which are in accord with human tradition, namely, the basic principles of the world, which are not in accord with Christ. For all the fullness of God's being dwells bodily in Christ. And you have been brought to fullness in him. Christ is the head over every ruler and authority. You were also circumcised in him, with a circumcision not done by human hands, in the putting off of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, when you were buried with Christ in baptism. And in baptism you were also raised with him through the faith worked by the God who raised Christ from the dead.

Even when you were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ by forgiving all our trespasses. God erased the record of our debt brought against us by his legal demands. This record stood against us, but he took it away by nailing it to the cross. After disarming the rulers and authorities, he made a public display of them by triumphing over them in Christ.

The Word of the Lord.

There are four books in the Bible that devote themselves to the most important events in Jesus' life: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Of those four, three end with Jesus' ascension into heaven. This could leave us thinking that Jesus' ascension is the end of his story, that after that cloud hid him from view he was gone and his story was over. But it's not.

Christ's story has not ended. Though his work to save us is complete, he is still working on high in heaven. And not only is he working, he is working with every possible bit of power imaginable while sitting at the Father's right hand. And as Jesus works on high, directing the world's events, his main concern is...us. You and me. The members of his body of believers. As Jesus works in heaven he has the good of his Church – all of his believers like you and me – in mind.

It may be hard for us to understand how this all works, because many of the things happening in this world would seem to indicate that Christ's Church is on the ropes. It's persecuted and put down in many parts of the world. It's mocked and ridiculed and road blocked in other places. But God's Word teaches – God himself promises – that this is true: Everything happening in this world today is happening for the eternal good of Christ's Church. Because he is still working for his church, with all imaginable power.

A lesson from Ephesians chapter 1:

This is why, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I never stop giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep praying that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, will give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in knowing Christ fully. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know the hope to which he has called you, just how rich his glorious inheritance among the saints is, and just how surpassingly great his power is for us who believe. It is as great as the working of his mighty strength, which God worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule, authority, power and dominion, and above every name that is given, not only in this age but also in the one to come. God also placed all things under his feet and made him head over everything for the church. The church is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

The Word of the Lord.

Before he ascended, Jesus promised to give his disciples everything they needed so that they could go out and tell the whole world the message of his salvation. First, Jesus told them exactly what the Scriptures said and exactly what they were to teach. Then, he promised them power from heaven to help them spread that message.

He fulfilled that promise very clearly on Pentecost, ten days after his ascension, when God sent his Holy Spirit to the disciples. On that day what looked like tongues of fire danced on the disciples' heads while they spoke in many languages to spread the message. Jesus equipped his disciples with the gospel message and the Holy Spirit and sent them out to witness.

And he still does that for his followers. All the power of the Holy Spirit, all the power we need to be his witnesses is contained in this sweet sentence that Jesus spoke: **"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations."**

Right in that sentence is the basic message that Jesus' people need in order to be his witnesses. And when that message is spoken, the Holy Spirit still comes from heaven to work in hearts. That great gospel message will change hearts as we witness for the ascended Jesus. We are his witnesses. And as we take his message out, he gives us the power of the Spirit, just as he did for the first disciples long ago.

The Gospel of St. Luke, chapter 24:

He said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to 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."

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. He said to them, "This is what is written and so it must be: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. Look, I am sending you what my Father promised. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

He led them out as far as the vicinity of Bethany. He lifted up his hands and blessed them. And while he was blessing them, he parted from them and was taken up into heaven. So they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. They were continually in the temple courts, praising and blessing God. Amen.

The Gospel of our Lord.

There are a few facts I'd like you to consider, and then see what conclusion you draw. Fact number one: your Savior-God knows every last little detail about you. He knows everything that you like and everything you don't like. Fact number two: in six normal days your God created the entire mind-boggling universe that we are a part of – all the stars, galaxies, and solar systems, including this incredibly complex earth we live on, which is just a pinprick of a pinprick on the canvass of the universe. Now think of that same Savior spending 2,000 years to prepare a special place in heaven, a place just...for...you. You, the person he knows perfectly and loves. A place for you, prepared by the one who can create with just the words of his mouth. So what conclusion can you draw about the place in heaven that is waiting for you?

This place that waits for you is no mirage in the desert. It is no hidden treasure that cannot be found or anything like that. The way to this place is very clearly marked out. The way is Jesus himself. The same ascended Jesus who is preparing a place for you is also the path to that place. He is the only path, and anyone who tries to find another way to that glorious place will be shut out. But the very one preparing the place for you is the path that never crumbles, fails, or leads astray. He leads you safely and securely to the place he's been preparing ever since the day he went back to heaven – a place beyond description, a place just for you.

The Gospel of St. John chapter 14:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with me, so that you may also be where I am. You know where I am going, and you know the way.”

“Lord, we don't know where you are going,” Thomas replied, “so how can we know the way?”

Jesus said to him, “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father, except through me. If you know me, you would also know my Father. From now on you do him and have seen him.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

While we are waiting for Jesus to take us to our own personal place in heaven, we want to remain in him. Because apart from Jesus we can do nothing good in God's eyes. We cannot grow spiritually. We cannot do any work acceptable to God. We cannot connect to God's forgiveness.

But being in Christ, being connected to him, flips everything around one hundred eighty degrees. In Christ we have the ability to do good works in God's eyes. Connected to him we can grow spiritually as we connect to the forgiveness he won for us. He makes all the difference. This is why Jesus uses the picture of a vine and branches. Either a branch is connected to the vine or it's not. And if it is connected, then it's alive, and it can grow, and it can bear pleasing fruit for the owner. But if it's not connected, then it can't do any of those things. Not even a little bit. It's totally dead and worthless.

And so, until Jesus returns or God takes us home, we seek to remain in Christ, connected to him. Now if God wanted to, he could connect us to Jesus any way he wanted. He could use magic recipes or walks in the woods, or he could zap us into Christ by striking us with lightning. But in the entire Bible, God only tells us of one way – just one way – to get connected and stay connected to our Savior. And that's through the gospel, which we find in God's Word and sacraments. Nothing else works. Nothing else connects us to him.

And so, as those who want to stay in him, nothing is more valuable than that gospel. It is the key to our connection with Christ and our life eternal.

The Gospel of St. John chapter 15:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he is going to cut off. And he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit.

"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I am going to remain in you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the Vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Perhaps the best thing about Jesus' ascension is knowing that someday he will be coming back from heaven. And when he returns, more than a few eyes will be focused on him. The eyes of every living creature will fix on him, and that day will be a glorious one for Jesus' people.

Because when our ascended Lord does return, he will be bringing blessings that our limited human minds cannot begin to wrap themselves around. A whole new heaven and a whole new earth. A new place with none of the things that make our lives in this world so hard, like death and mourning and crying and pain. All of those things are old. They are part of this old world, this old order of things that is crumbling to bits and passing away.

This new place will have none of the old things that give us trouble, but it will have everything new to give us joy. The full presence of God will be there, and he will live with us forever. God will no longer hide his face from us as he does right now. He will no longer come to us through the pages of a book, and water, and bread and wine. Instead, we will see him in a whole new way. We will see his full glory, all of the time, face to face, with none of it hidden or concealed.

A new heaven and new earth – a perfect heaven and a perfect earth – are coming with Jesus when he returns. Praise be to him who makes everything new and perfect for us forever.

Jesus, the Ascended Lord, assures us this will happen. He says, "These words are trustworthy and true."

A lesson from Revelation chapter 21.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, because the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And the sea no longer existed. And I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride for her husband.

And from the throne I heard a loud voice that said, "Look! God's dwelling is with people. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no death or sorrow or crying or pain, because the former things have passed away."

The one who was seated on the throne said to me, "Look, I am making everything new!" He also said, "Write, for these words are trustworthy and true."

The Word of the Lord.