

What's Next?

Acts 1:1-11

How do you top a great experience? What do you next? One of the most iconic advertising campaigns of the last 50 years or so is when the Super Bowl MVP is asked "What are you going to do next?"—after his moment of triumph. The answer is, "I'm going to Disney World!" Now, they usually film different versions depending on which area of the country they're in, or whether they need more extra visitors at Disney World or Disney Land. But the answer, and the joy, is still the same.

How did this come about? According to former Disney CEO Michael Eisner, during the January 1987 grand opening for the Star Tours attraction at Disneyland, he and his wife dined with Dick Rutan and Jeana Yeager, who in December 1986 had piloted the first aircraft to fly around the world without stopping or refueling. After Jane Eisner asked what the pilots planned to do next, they replied, "Well, we're going to Disneyland." She later told her husband the phrase would make a great advertising campaign. She was obviously right.

What's next? That's what we're looking at today as we look at the story of Jesus' ascension. What comes next after Easter? How can you top that?

And if you were asked what Jesus did after Easter, ascension probably wouldn't be one of your first answers. It's one of the Feast days of the church, the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus, but we don't make a big deal out of it anymore. We didn't have a special service on Thursday, which was actually 40 days after Easter. Families didn't gather together to celebrate like they do for Christmas or Easter. Here at Memorial we stop lighting the Christ

Candle until Christmas, to show that we've reached the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus, that he is no longer with us the same way he was during his time on Earth. The Ascension is as important in the life of Jesus as Christmas is, but we don't get a lot of visitors today.

What's next for Jesus after Easter? He appears to doubting Thomas and the rest of the disciples. He meets them back along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He's restored and forgiven Peter and his denials. He's taught, done more miracles, now he ascends. What does that mean?

What the Ascension means, though, is that Jesus is now at the right hand of the Father. It means that Jesus rules everywhere and everything. What the Ascension means is that instead of being limited to being only in one particular place at one particular time, Jesus returned to where he exercises his divine attributes of omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. As Eugene Peterson writes, "Jesus rules church and world and every last one of us from heaven's strategic center."

What's next for the disciples? They're expecting Jesus to still just do what they'd expected him to do. The Messiah was to come and restore the kingdom of Israel.

The disciples want Christ to fulfill his promises of restoration. They wait as those who are still dependent on the father's faithfulness, those who have no control over the timetable of a beneficent God who graciously allows enough time to accomplish the work begun in Jesus.

The time between Easter and the restoration of the kingdom is a time for witness. There is work to be done.

The disciples' response is prayer. The action demanded of the church is more than human busyness and effort. Instead, they wait and pray for empowerment, for obedience, for patience. Waiting implies there are things that need doing in the world that are beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own effort and programs.

The challenge is not in knowing enough about Jesus to witness about him. It is in having the authorization and empowerment to do the work of Jesus.

What's next for us? Christians are often accused of having our heads in the clouds. We are told we are so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good. We can spend so much time and energy thinking or worrying or speculating about what comes next, about spiritual things, about God's will for our lives, that we forget about the people around us.

Every year on Seminary choir tour, this reading from Acts would feature prominently in the tour booklet. The message from the angels, "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" was used to remind us that we shouldn't just stand around looking up to heaven. Instead, we should look around and see what else needed to be set up or taken down, make sure we knew our parts, and maybe even talked to the congregation members who were around to greet us.

When the angels ask the disciples why they are still standing looking up to heaven, though, it's not because the disciples had work that they

needed to be doing. Not yet. Jesus had told them that they should return to Jerusalem to wait. They were to wait for the Holy Spirit. Then they would be sent out. They would no longer just be disciples, or students, but would be apostles, sent out into Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Instead, the disciples are standing there staring at the last place they saw Jesus. They look up and feel abandoned.

Jesus didn't ascend to abandon us. He ascended to complete his mission. O.P. Kretzmann wrote "The Ascension did not take Jesus away... It brought heaven near... In the realm in which He now reigns time and space have no meaning... There is no up and down, no near and far, no darkness, and no distance in the world of faith... He is as near as yesterday's prayer, today's joy, tomorrow's sorrow... His homecoming has made heaven a home for us who still walk far from home..."

After Jesus ascended, the disciples become apostles, those who were sent out. They traveled the whole world, sharing the Good News that had so impacted their lives. They told what they had seen, what they had heard, what they had experienced. And even when they were met with hostility, imprisoned, or even killed, they knew that God was with them through it all. They knew that Jesus wasn't with them the same way he had been, but he was with them nonetheless. They knew that he ruled.

It's graduation season. ISU's graduation is this weekend. So is Gilbert's. Ames High graduation is next weekend, and other area high schools are following a similar schedule. Graduates may think they know what's next. They've got plans. They've got dreams. They

know where they'll go to school or work, know where they'll move to, know who they'll be with. But there will be questions. There will be detours. There will be unexpected opportunities and obstacles.

We don't always know what comes next. We don't know what the future holds. But we know who holds the future. We know that Jesus ascended to bring heaven near. He ascended to be at heaven's strategic center. He ascended so that he was no longer limited by time and space as he was during his earthly ministry. He ascended so we could know he is in control, whatever comes next. What a wonderful promise that is.

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