

The Radical Rabbi Who Was Always Disappearing

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Ascension" by Ivan Filichev

Prayer of Illumination

Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts and our minds
to your wondrous love.
Speak your word to us;
silence in us any voice but your own
and be with us now as we turn our attention,
our minds and our hearts, to you,
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

Luke wrote a two-volume work that is found in the New Testament:

- Volume 1: *"The Gospel according to Luke"* is about Jesus—his words and deeds.
- Volume 2: *"Acts"* is about how Jesus passes the baton to the Apostles and the church to continue his ministry.

Our passage today from Acts is after Christ's resurrection, but Christ is still on earth. For forty days Christ appeared from time to time and spoke with the disciples about the kingdom of God. During these forty days, Jesus gave ample proof that he was alive. *Can you imagine being a fly on the wall for those conversations?*

Forty days is symbolic in scripture for important transitions or times of testing that last for an indeterminate period of time—but not forever. In many ways, this pandemic is for us our forty days of testing. It feels like forever, but eventually it too will pass. We too must stay the course and keep the faith.

When the forty days after his resurrection ran up and he was about to return to the Father, Jesus gave his final instructions to the apostles about continuing his ministry. And so Jesus' ascension is both the end and the beginning. It's the postlude to Jesus' earthly ministry. And also the prelude to the Spirit's ministry through the church, that continues through us.

So let's hear from:

Scripture: Acts 1:6-11 (NRSV)

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods 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." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – The Radical Rabbi Who Was Always Disappearing

When you carefully study Jesus' life in the gospel, another bad habit of his crops up:

The radical rabbi disappeared and re-appeared...a lot.

Jesus started young with this, when he was just a tweenager. At twelve years old he disappeared from the family caravan and worried his earthly parents sick. Three days later they found him in the temple, listening to the teachers of the law and asking questions. *"Why were you searching for me?"*

Jesus said to his parents, “*Didn’t you know that I must be in my Father’s house?*” I don’t know about you, but I would have definitely grounded Jesus if I were in Joseph’s sandals.

Jesus continued his disappearing acts into adulthood—He escaped in boats, up mountains, or into the wilderness—going on getaways to refuel and spend time with his Father. Like Jesus, we too need solitude and society. Presence and absence. As we all know in our COVID-19 world, life gets out of whack when we don’t have both.

After John the Baptist’s death, Jesus disappeared to mourn. Before the cross, Jesus mysteriously escaped from stonings and being pushed off a cliff by hostile crowds. After Jesus’s death—he disappeared, but on the third day he reappeared when he saw Mary in the garden of the tomb. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared suddenly to the disciples when he walked through walls. He suddenly appeared on the road to Emmaus and then vanished while eating with two disciples. Jesus appeared again on the beach, with fish on the grill—and the carpenter gave fishing lessons to his fishermen friends. And here we are at Jesus’ ascension—disappearing up into the clouds, returning to his Father in heaven. And leaving us all alone.

But even that’s not for good—Jesus will come again for us in the future, just as he left us.

All this appearing and disappearing at inopportune moments reminds us—Jesus just can’t be pinned down. We can know him, but not control him. Think about C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* and Aslan. And JRR Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and Gandalf. These Christ figures were always disappearing and appearing. Why? What’s going on here?

The absence of Jesus helps grow us up. We have to trust and step out in faith on our own. But he also never really leaves us—it’s a paradox. Remember Jesus’ words in the Great Commission before his departure?

“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

We see and sense the invisible Christ, with the eyes of faith.



One of our songs this morning is composed by pianist Ken Medema—“*Lord Listen to Your Children Praying.*” Ken was born nearly blind. He began to learn to play the piano at age five. Initially he could see only vague shapes and shadows, but as he got better at the piano, his eyesight got worse and worse. Eventually he went entirely blind. With time, he learned to play the piano by ear and experienced the piano, without seeing it. His playing, composing, and improvisation on the piano continued and kept developing and maturing, despite his blindness.

Our faith in Christ is much the same way. Jesus is always with us, but there are times when he leaves us. He seems nowhere to be found. We feel left in the dark. But his temporary absence helps us to trust, to step out in faith, with a gulp of uncertainty. It's scary, but it grows us.

The disciples were panicking as Jesus prepared to go.

"What now Jesus?"

"You've been teaching us these last three years."

"You left us when you died, now you're here again."

Or as children often ask on road trips, *"are we there yet?"* Is now the time you'll finally restore the kingdom to Israel? Are you *finally* going to kick Rome's butt? Set up Israel as a theocracy? Appoint us to high positions in your political regime?

Jesus redirects the disciples away from political nationalism, doesn't give them what they want. Dates and timetables are God's business, not yours.

Yes, Jesus is king—the Son of David. But he's a very different kind of king, over a very different kind of kingdom from earthly ones. Jesus' words are very important for us to hear anytime, but especially during an election cycle.

Our faith isn't in political parties or presidents.

Our ultimate trust isn't in government or legislation.

Our faith is in the Prince of Peace.

Look at a coin, it will remind you—in God we trust. The state isn't our church.

I encourage all of you to vote—that's an important civic duty and responsibility we have. It's good to have informed political convictions and positions shaped by our faith and core convictions. We should desire and work for laws that are just for all.

We should care about our country and be engaged. I'll be voting. I know who I want to win. I'll be disappointed if my candidate doesn't win. But no matter who wins, our faith is not in the next president or a political party. That would be idolatry. Christ is my Savior and my candidate, and he has no term limits.

By God's grace, Christ has elected me, elected us for his service. My hope is and always will be in the Kingdom of God. Our mission stays the same.

A power far greater and more noble than political power is given to the church. Not political power, but Pentecostal power.

Jesus teaches us what the kingdom of God is in the Lord's Prayer. It's God's will to be done *"on earth as it is in heaven."* You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. You will be vested with power from on high—not earthly power, but heavenly power on earth *"and you will be my witnesses."*

Jesus put it this way quoting from Isaiah 61 for his mission statement:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to comfort all who mourn, to give them the oil of gladness and the mantle of praise."

We now take the baton from Jesus and do these works in the power of the Spirit too.

This task isn't to be done in our own strength, but in the strength of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has a way of taking us beyond the comforts of the familiar. The Spirit gets us outside of ourselves. Helps us move beyond ourselves.

Go to Jerusalem and wait→*but don't stop there.*

Go to Judea and Samaria→*but don't pitch your tents there.*

Go with the good news→*to the ends of the earth.*

In the ancient world of the first century, when someone was enthroned king—heralds and messengers would be sent out to the farthest reaches of the kingdom. They would go in all directions of the empire—Spain, Egypt, Britain, making known the good news that there would be no anarchy. We have a king! And these subjects would joyfully proclaim their allegiance.

We do the same—but it is for King Jesus and his kingdom of heaven. We're Christ's ambassadors on a mission of love, going near and far—there's no boundary. All are welcome. We go to the ends of the earth. Sometimes we go out on mission, sometimes the mission comes to us. We've never arrived. We keep growing and learning. We're not there yet, but we can enjoy the journey.

After Jesus gave these instructions, Jesus was lifted up and a cloud hid him and took him out of their sight. Clouds symbolize God's presence. Often when God reveals himself in Scripture, clouds surround him—there's mystery. Clouds not only reveal, they conceal. They make visibility difficult. Even when he reveals more of himself to us, he also conceals. Even when Christ appears, he disappears. We can't control God. Christ is free.

So the disciples stared into the sky—straining to see Jesus—kind of like a balloon getting smaller in the distance. Maybe they thought he'd return from his hot air balloon ride. But then two men in white—angels—appeared to give next steps. These two witnesses have appeared in other scenes in Luke. At the transfiguration, the resurrection, and now the ascension. Christ will return again in the same way—he won't disappear forever. But don't stand here gazing up at the sky longing for that day. It will be a while. Go back to Jerusalem. Wait. Pray. Don't do anything else...yet. Keep waiting upon the Lord, trusting and praying. In due time, you'll receive Pentecostal power to witness.

There's a spirituality of waiting in the scriptures. *Those who wait upon the Lord, says Isaiah, shall renew their strength.* Keep waiting, keep persisting in prayer Immanuel. God is going to take us to a new place—in due time. We can walk back to our Jerusalem in hope, waiting for our next steps, waiting for power, recharging. Pentecost will come.

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Maybe a good definition of prayer is the decision to disappear from our busyness and our to do lists and our chores and spend time in God's presence that we've been missing. Then when we reappear from this time with God, often our worries, doubts, fears, and inhibitions disappear—or at least seem a lot smaller in God's presence. We're refreshed and renewed to witness to Christ and his kingdom—the good news for a world gone bad. And we'll see the invisible Christ with the eyes of faith—the invisible Christ who has been here all along.

Amen.

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