

“Help Our Unbelief – The Apostles’ Creed, Part 6:
Risen Again and Ascended”

One time when I was a kid, I went to a concert. It was a Christian concert, so---you know---the band wasn’t just supposed to play their instruments. They were supposed to share the gospel. (I’m glad they did.) Here’s how they did it.

[A person runs, catches up to some people, panting, saying “He- he- h- hhh- he is risen!”

“Who is risen?”

“Jesus!”

“Who’s that?”

“He’s one of the ones who died on a Roman cross on Friday?”

“Why did he die on a Roman cross?”

“Because he was accused of talking like he was God.”

“Isn’t that a really bad thing to do?”

“Well, it is, if you’re not God.”

“And he wasn’t God, right?”

“Actually he was. And he still is.”

“Then how did he die, if he was God?”

“Well, he was also a man.”

“He was God and a man at the same time? Why?”

“So he could live our life, but then give himself as a sacrifice for our sins!”

“Wait---how’d God become a man?”

“Alright, let me write this down ...” --- The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of God. ...

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That’s kind of how the good news spread. First, by the words of people who knew Jesus, knew he had died, and then saw him alive again. Paul says (1 Cor 15:6) that along with his disciples, some 500 other people saw Jesus, too. And he says, look, a lot of them are still alive. Ask them.

Some of the disciples said, “you know, we should write this down.” Mark was a companion of Peter, and wrote down Peter’s gospel---probably first. The other gospels added their perspective and experience.

Luke added a sequel to his gospel. Some people have said that the first volume should be called the Acts of Jesus Christ, and the second one should be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. After all, the sending and the arrival of the Son comes at the beginning of Luke’s gospel, and the sending and arrival of the Spirit comes at the beginning of Luke’s sequel.

That’s cool. But there’s another way to look at it. It’s not that Jesus steps aside at the beginning of Luke’s sequel, which we call Acts. Rather, Jesus, the hero of Luke’s first book, is celebrated as the triumphant hero at the beginning of Luke’s second book.

Pretend that the first book is the story of a runner winning a marathon against all odds. At the end of the first book, he completes the marathon, and wins. Then the sequel begins with the medal ceremony. The national anthem plays; the gold medal is awarded; the runner stands at the top of the podium, triumphant.

The Ascension of Jesus Christ at the beginning of Acts is, yes, in a sense, the “going away” of Jesus. But don’t forget the place to which he goes. “He ascended into heaven.”

The Ascension is the enthronement of our king! A king who is finally worthy to ascend the hill of the LORD: the one with clean hands and a pure heart, who’s never lifted his heart as an offering to a false god (Psalm 24).

Where I’m from LeBron James is king. Kind of. He’s from my hometown. He was called “the Chosen One” when he was a kid. He was crowned “King James.” He played for our hometown NBA basketball team. He changed the economy of NE Ohio just by being awesome at basketball. But he couldn’t quite win us a championship. (We don’t win championships. Once every 50 or 60 years, maybe.)

But then he left us for Miami in a really immature way. And won a championship with them!

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But still, he gave poor Ohio children free bicycles. And taught them to play basketball at youth camps. Eventually, he returned to Ohio. And this time, he won us a championship!

But then he left again--for California to play with the Lakers. Everyone from Ohio who's good at anything leaves Ohio for Florida or California.

But as soon as he left, he opened a school in Ohio for poor kids from his home town.

So the question is: Is King James *worthy*? Is he worthy to be “The King of Ohio?”

The answer is: kind of. He's more worthy than anybody else. But he's not the king we hoped for. He's even left us a few times.

Let's think of Israel's greatest king for a minute. David gets to the throne because Saul failed. Because Saul's heart wasn't bowing down before God's throne. You can't rule for God unless your heart and life and words and actions and attitudes are bowing down before God's throne in heaven. So Saul is set aside. He's unqualified. He can't ascend the hill of the LORD.

And the prophet Samuel goes searching for a new king. He's impressed by all the handsome older boys in Jesse's family. God is unimpressed. He's looking for a bowed-down heart and life. Finally it turns out that Jesse had one more son out in the countryside looking after sheep. This boy David doesn't look like a king. But the LORD has seen him---not only fighting off wild animals to protect his little flock. God has seen him *bowing down* in his heart. And so he's anointed to be the next king by Samuel.

This actually causes David all kinds of trouble. Yes, the Spirit of God comes upon David. But he's also got to fight a Philistine warrior named Goliath. He's got to fight lots of other battles. And most heartbreaking of all, he realizes that Saul hates him, and will never stop trying to kill him.

But then, sure enough, he eventually becomes king. He ascends the throne. Once he's there, he does a lot of things that shepherd boy David would have done. He was humble and brave. He bowed before God but was courageous in defending his people's enemies.

But not always. Sometimes his heart wasn't bowed down. Sometimes he used his power to get what he wanted, and pretended that God wasn't on the throne of the

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Universe. And especially when he stole the wife of one of his best soldiers, and then had that soldier killed in battle to cover it up.

Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who can stand next to the King of the Universe, where God rules everything in power, truth, justice, and grace? Well, the one who has clean hands and a pure heart. The one who uses power justly, graciously, truthfully. Even David himself knows that he doesn’t truly belong there--not forever, anyway. And he looks forward to a king who *is* worthy.

David has a lot of “Jesus” in him. But he has a lot of “Saul” in him. Too much “Saul” to be king forever.

Then comes Jesus. From David’s town, David’s family. He was special, but he didn’t spent his childhood and youth and young-adulthood trying to look like King Material.

When he began his ministry, the Spirit of God came down on him and rested on him with power, like David. He defeated the bigger Goliath---the Satan. He endured all kinds of temptation. But stood strong. The first person to ever win this battle.

Jesus---a man and God incarnate, had power. But he used that power to serve rather than to be served. To give life rather than to take life. At every moment, he did all things well. He was fierce toward the enemies of his little flock of sheep---those religious authorities who crushed the spirits of the poor and the poor in spirit. He was tender to the fatherless, the poor, and the widows. He touched the physically sick and the blind and restored them to wholeness. He told people the truth for a change.

But then, just at the height of his popularity-- Just when he had really proved to everyone that he actually deserved to be King on David’s throne -- he went up the wrong hill. He ascended not to David’s hill, but up on Calvary. He ascended not to David’s throne, but was nailed to wooden cross-beams.

Even while he was there, he was tempted to use his power to save himself. Stop and think about that for a minute. Did the Accuser and Tempter win by getting Jesus killed? Or were the forces of evil hoping that Jesus wouldn’t go through with it? That he’d save himself and destroy his killers and accusers?

But he stays. He bows before his Father, and---even when he can’t see his Father’s face anymore--- even when he feels like David had--- that his Father had forsaken him--- he stays.

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Friends, the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection is that Jesus is the one person in all of human history to do all things well, all the time. And the meaning of his ascension into heaven, into the throne room of God, is that the Lord of the Universe is declaring:

“Look! Finally! A man after my own heart. Not just most of the time, like David. But all of the time! Look! Finally! A shepherd who’s brave and fierce toward wolves and bears, but who’s tender toward even the weakest of his sheep! Look! Finally! Someone who can hold power in his hands, but who will actually use it justly, wisely, graciously, truthfully!”

When Jesus is taken up from the earth into heaven in Acts 1, God is saying:

“Look, Israel: the king you’ve always wanted, but never quite had! Look, people of the whole world: this Son of mine is not just fit to reign in Jerusalem, or in Judea, or in Samaria, but from one end of the earth to the other. Look, friends. My Son is exalted to my right hand, where he has all the power and authority. He uses it right. I’m giving it all to him.”

To live this creed

The question for us today is this. Are you going to pretend that your heart is the one place in the universe over which Jesus is not Lord and King? Are you going to allow all creation to bow before the throne of God, while your heart stands tall and proud? Are you going to say in your heart, “well, Jesus died for my sins, so I don’t have to worry about doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with my God--Jesus did that. I get to do what I want”?

As David once sang: “The fool says in their heart that there is no God” (Ps 14). You can say with your mind that there’s a God. You can come to church and sing with your voice that there is a God. You can recite the Apostles’ Creed, declaring that, actually, Jesus Christ is God and Lord. You can demand that your children follow the rules of God. You can try to run your company on Christian principles, based on God’s rule. But the most important question for you is: in your heart. Is there a God? Is Jesus Lord? Do you feel the majesty of his kingship? Does it make you tremble? Does his ascension to God’s throne convict you deep in the core of your being that *you* are not worthy to come up his holy hill? Does his reign press on your heart in such a way that you know that *you* are being called to use every little bit of power and authority you have with perfect justice, truth, wisdom, mercy, and grace?

Jesus reigns over you. You’re not king. Does this make you joyful or angry? Are you pretending that your heart, and therefore that your attitudes, words, and actions,

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are not subject to the rule of the exalted King Jesus? The *fool* says, in their heart, “there’s no God here. I’m god here.” Don’t be a fool.

But instead, look at every place in your life that you have some degree of power or authority. And then ask yourself, “How do I express the reality that, ultimately, it’s Jesus, and not me, that has all authority in heaven and earth?”

You’re a mother. You’re spending lots of time in dynamic authority over your children. How is the reign of Jesus extending itself from God’s right hand, through your attitudes, words, and actions, into the life and heart of your kids? Can they sense not just the authority of Jesus coming through you---but the grace, truth, and justice of Jesus?

You’re a doctor. You have pharmacological power and authority over every patient that comes into your examining room, and over all the nurses and staff that assist you. How is the reign of Jesus extending itself from God’s throne, through your demeanor, the way you touch your patients, the questions you ask them, and the prescriptions you give? How is the tenderness and justice of Jesus the King working its way through your office, in the way you speak to your fellow doctors, to the nurses, to the receptionist? Is the grace, truth, and justice of King Jesus, ascended on high, shining forth in your practice?

Whether you’re a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick maker, there are a thousand ways in which Jesus’ ascension needs to work its way through the things you do and the way you do them, to show his grace, mercy, and truth. The life of a Christian disciple, following King Jesus, works with this prayer:

“Jesus, King Ascended: Show me one way today that I can bow in my heart. Show me one way I can bow with my head. Show me one way I can bow with my hands. And help me to bow in the presence of everyone I meet. Especially in the presence of those over whom I have some kind of power and authority. Because you are king.”

Do you believe it?

This is revolutionary, friends. This amounts to an overthrow of the throne of your heart. Is something or someone else is on the throne of your heart? Or is king Jesus?