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Pastor Mark Toone  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *Moving Mountains: Mount of Ascension*

Acts 1:1-12

Of all the mountains in the New Testament, the Mt. of Olives might have been Jesus' favorite. Here He taught his disciples about the end times as they sat, gazing out across the Kidron Valley. Here He began His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This was also their favorite camping spot when they were in Jerusalem. And on the night before His arrest, Jesus and the boys went to the Mt. of Olives to sing hymns and pray. So, it was a very special place to Jesus.

But there is one other important thing that occurred on this mountain. This event is memorialized by a prominent bell tower that sits on top of that hill. The tower has a funny nickname, but I couldn't remember it. So I wrote my Jewish friend, Ronen, to refresh my memory. Know what they call this tower? The Rocket Ship. Ronen went on to say, "It's where your boss ascended back to where He went."

This is the Church of the Ascension. It marks the spot where Jesus ascended back to the Father at the end of His earthly ministry. The Ascension of Jesus is mentioned throughout the New Testament. In John, when Mary Magdalene tries to hug Jesus, He says, "Don't! I have not yet ascended to My father." In I Peter 3 it reads that Jesus has "gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him." In I Timothy 3, Paul sums up the story of Jesus: **"He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory."**

There is no doubt that the bodily ascension of Jesus was a treasured doctrine of the early Church. But **interestingly**, Luke is the only one of the gospel writers who tells this remarkable story. [Read Acts 1:1-12]

Jesus was never quite the Messiah they expected. He didn't come from the right town, wasn't born of the right parents, didn't belong to the right religious clubs and always seemed to be fighting with the right spiritual folks. That didn't seem very Messiah-like. But most confusing of all—especially for some of his followers—Jesus seemed to give the Romans a pass. The Messiah was supposed to show up and kick some Roman rear end... boot those bullies out of Israel... send them back to Italy with their scabbards between their legs!

But Jesus didn't do any of those things. In fact, He did a most un-Messiah-like thing by dying on a cross. **Of course, three days later, He was alive again so that was pretty cool.** That fell into the plus column of unexpected Messiah behavior. And then, as Luke points out, Jesus spent 40 days with the guys; teaching, encouraging, preparing them for what lay ahead. He told them to wait in Jerusalem because the Father was going to send them a gift: the very same Holy Spirit of Jesus, raised from the dead, would live in his followers and give them the power to do whatever God wanted them to do.

So, after a start that might have been disappointing to His disciples, near the end, Jesus was starting to act more like the powerful Messiah they had expected. So, they returned to a favorite topic... beating up Romans. Their last question—take note of this—the very last question the disciples ever ask the earthly Jesus is this: "Now, Jesus? **Now** will you finally kick out the Romans and set up your earthly kingdom? **Now** will you finally do the Messiah thing that we were counting on all along?"

Wow, once we get an idea in our heads, it's hard to get rid of it, isn't it? Especially when it is a religious idea. Once we think we have God figured out—and how God is supposed to behave figured out—God has His work cut out changing our minds. "**Now** will you set up your earthly kingdom, Jesus?"

How does Jesus reply? "None of your beeswax!" Any of you ever use that expression when you were a kid? "Whatcha doin'?" "None of your beeswax!" Isn't that exactly what Jesus is saying here? "**It's not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.**" It **is** going to happen... my kingdom will be established on this earth. My Father has set the date on His calendar. But when that is, is none of your beeswax. So leave it alone!"

This isn't the first time Jesus said this, is it? Another time (on the Mt. of Olives, by the way,) the disciples asked Jesus, "...what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Jesus taught for a while and then, near the end of His talk, said these words: "**No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.**" (Matthew 24: 36)

You know, don't you, that the world was supposed to end on May 21? According to radio Bible teacher Harold Camping, the rapture was supposed to occur. Judgment Day! May 21, 2011. Mr. Camping was a little embarrassed when, the next morning, we were all back in church. Apparently, he had miscalculated... again. For the second time! And all those millions of dollars spent on billboards turned out to be wasted money. On May 22, another group couldn't pass up the opportunity to fight billboard with billboard. "That was awkward! 'No one knows the day or the hour...'"

"When will we finally have the political power we've been waiting for, Jesus? What's the date? When will you finally kick out the bad guys and take control and bring judgment?" "It's none of your beeswax," Jesus says. But then He goes on to tell

them what their business is. **“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.”**

“I want you to go and huddle up in Jerusalem for a time. Stay there until the Holy Spirit comes. But then, **I want you to break the huddle**, and go tell your story.” That’s what a witness is, after all. Someone who tells what they have experienced. How many remember what our theme will be next year? *The Year of Good News*. We are going to equip ourselves to do a better job sharing the good news of Jesus. Evangelism. Now, to some the idea of evangelism is scary. We think it requires clever arguments, in-depth Bible knowledge, and the ability to confound our enemies in rhetorical battle. And some of that is helpful. It can actually be fun.

But at its core, evangelism—good news-telling—is simply sharing the story of what Jesus has done in **your** life. It’s the one religious thing that no one can argue with. If you say, “I know Jesus is alive because I met Him, I’ve experienced Him. He’s taken away my sin, set me free from guilt and given me a direction and purpose in life that I never had before.” That’s what it means to be a witness. If Jesus has changed your life—your marriage, your self-image, your sense of despair or self-loathing or hopelessness—just telling that story is a witness to the power of Christ. **Do you have a story?**

The disciples did. They could certainly speak of the difference that the resurrected Jesus had made in their lives. Jesus said, “I want you to huddle up, wait for the Holy Spirit—because only if you have **My** power inside of you can you accomplish what I’m going to ask of you. And then, **I want you to spread out**. Start right here in Jerusalem and the surrounding Judea. Then, I’m going to ask you to do something harder. Go to your enemies the Samaritans... those half-breed Jews. The people you’ve hated for generations. I want you to share your witness with your enemies. Because the people you’ve hated all this time... I love them, too. And then—and now, I realize I’m asking the hardest thing of all—I want you to go to the whole world. All of those Gentiles—the people you call ‘dogs’—I want you to take your witness to them, too! I want you to take my good news to the whole world.”

And that was it... the last words of Jesus. Off He went into the air, surrounded by a cloud—just like the cloud on the Mt of Transfiguration—He disappeared from sight.

When I played football as a kid, I was a quarterback. We went into the huddle, I called the play and then I would say, “Ready...” and everyone else would clap their hands and say, “Break!” Let’s try it. “Ready... break!”

So, Jesus disappears into heaven, and Peter looks around and says, “Ready...” And what? Nothing. Why? They were gawking up into the sky... at the amazing sight of Jesus disappearing into heaven. “Ready...” Nope. Nothing. Jaws open... just gaping away. They are so taken by this spiritual moment that they forget to “Break!”

Finally, God sends a couple of angels along to break up the party: **“Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?”**

This is the second time today that the disciples have gotten into trouble. “Jesus, when are you going to set up your kingdom?” “None of your beeswax.” Now: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. “Readyyyy...” Silence. “Hey, guys, what are you gawking at? You’ve got work to do!

Finally, the disciples get it. The book of Acts tells how they got it. (Professor John Lennox who will be here in two weeks, he will be preaching for much of the summer from the Book of Acts.) The disciples did what they were told. Returned to Jerusalem, waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit, and then they went... to their friends in Jerusalem and Judea, to their enemies in Samaria, and to the strangers—the Gentile “dogs”—in the rest of the world. And that’s why we are sitting here this morning... we, the disciples of Jesus, who are **also** called to be his witnesses.

This story teaches that there are two extremes that disciples of Jesus must avoid. **The first is an unhealthy preoccupation with this world.** The disciples wanted to set up a kingdom. They wanted to control their world. They wanted to make a utopia. Kick out the bad guys, put in the good guys, take care of their own and make things right. And there’s something about that that we Americans can’t help but admire, isn’t there? On this Fourth of July weekend we remember our founding fathers who had the courage to say, “Things aren’t right. Tyrants are in power. We can do better. We must do better!” And they did. We live in the greatest nation on earth. **But it is still not utopia.** It never will be. God has blessed this nation, but the interests of Christ’s kingdom and of the United States of America are not always the same. As I’ve mentioned before, there are people for whom the flag of this nation is more important than the cross of Christ... **and that will always be idolatry.**

We can also be guilty of this extreme in our own family... our own little “kingdoms.” When we are so focused on ourselves—our self-interest, our success, our future, our career, our children, our grandchildren... so focused on making those things the center of our universe, so focused on controlling and managing and obsessing over the details of our “kingdom”—we forget that Jesus has something more for us... something higher for us. **I believe that we here at Chapel Hill are a part of that.** When we joined this church, we aligned with something bigger than ourselves, something greater than ourselves... the mission of God in Christ. It is to this mission that God calls every one of his children. But when we are intent on co-opting Christ’s kingdom for our own personal interests—acting as if we think that Jesus’ number one job is to keep me and mine happy and prosperous and beautiful—it’s like we are sitting on the Mt. of Olives with the disciples.

Sometimes we get nosy. We want God to explain his ways to us. We want God to spell out everything for us. We want God to align His plans with our plans. And when we behave that way, we too might hear the words, “That’s none of your

beeswax! I've got a job for you to do. You be my witness... and let me worry about the other stuff."

But **the other Christian error** is to be so spiritual that we are worthless. The old expression is, "So heavenly minded that we are no earthly good." It is very easy for us to huddle up... and just stay that way. Come to church. Enjoy our Bible studies, love our LifeGroups, huddle and cuddle together... and just stay that way. Gawking at spiritual things together for so long, that we ignore our commission... ignore the world that God loves. You know, if you're on the inside of huddle, it looks great. The faces of everyone you love. But have you ever noticed what you are looking at when you're on the outside of a huddle? Not very attractive... not very welcoming. But inside, it's so comfy—so familiar, fits so well, feels so good!

Kind of like this. Like a big old jar of marbles, we cuddle and huddle together. Nice and cozy. Looks cool. Feels comfortable. **There are lots of churches like that.** So focused on spiritual stuff that they have no care for the broken world that Christ died for and ordered us to **invade** with our testimony. I wonder how often, on Sunday mornings, Jesus sits up there in heaven and, as the worship services end around the world he says, "Okay, now you've been trained, encouraged, empowered with my Spirit. Now, go get 'em! Ready....." (Nothing.)

You know what Jesus wants, don't you? Of us? "Ready...Break!" Not too focused on earthy stuff... not too focused on heavenly stuff—but empowered by His Spirit, equipped to tell our story, and willing to go into our world with the good news of Jesus. **Like this!** [Pull up the jar... marbles spill out in every direction.]

What error do you need corrected? Are you so focused on setting up your own little utopia that you don't really care what Jesus wants you to do? Or are you so captivated with spiritual stuff that you don't really care about the world that Jesus died to save? Somewhere in the middle is good! Somewhere in the middle is where we need to be. So, team, I have only one thing to say to you this morning. "Ready.... Break!"

As a reminder that we are called to roll out of here and be a witness for Jesus, will you come up here after the service and pick up one of these marbles and put it in your pocket? (It will also help us get things cleaned up!)

## **SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- **Read the passage out loud.**
- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in

your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **Dig deeper**

1. What was behind the questions the disciples asked Jesus in Acts 1:6? How does Jesus respond and why?

2. The disciples get in trouble a second time in this passage. How?

3. What message does this text speak to us, the disciples in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What does Jesus expect of us and what keeps us from obeying him? Be specific!