



Date: 5th & 12th May 2024

Theme: **The Ascension:**
Witnesses not Stargazers

Bible Reading: **Acts 1:6-11**

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PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

Please remember to contact your group beforehand to remind them of the date and time of your meeting. Please make yourself familiar with all the material and Bible passage. The hymns *Hail the day that sees him rise* (StF 300) and *We sing the praise of Jesus* (StF 315) may also be helpful to draw upon.

PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

The period that this *Good Soil* covers is the final two Sundays of the Easter season, which includes Ascension Day (this year it falls on 9th May). This marks the point where the risen Jesus ascends (moves upward) into heaven, 40 days after Easter, and the disciples are left without his physical presence, waiting for the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (10 days later). The material focuses on this part of the story, and what our response to the Ascension might be.

Either reading your Bible at home, or borrowing a copy from the church, **please read carefully Acts chapter 1, verses 6-11**. Try to imagine if you had been one of Jesus' disciples and gone through the dramatic events of Jesus' death and resurrection, and were never quite sure where or when Jesus would pop up next with the post-resurrection appearances: how would it feel to finally see the miraculous and awe-inspiring event of Jesus ascending to heaven? You might like to also read **Luke 24:50-52**.

STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS

As you gather together, in groups of 3-5 people, talk about:

Have you ever thought about or looked into the story of the Ascension before? What do you think of it? Do you understand it? Have your thoughts changed over time? What does it mean to you now?

The disciples were standing in awe of Jesus rising up. *Have you ever been so captivated or engrossed in something (maybe day-dreaming) that you haven't noticed what was going on around you? Have you been 'miles away', but then suddenly brought back into the room? Can you give an example? Share your thoughts and experiences with the group? How does this make you feel?*

You might like to feed back some of your reflections to the rest of the group.

A PRAYER

Risen and ascended Lord,
may we meet you in this moment.
Empowered by your Spirit,
may your word speak to our hearts
that we may hear and know
that you are alive and reigning in our lives.
Give us boldness to speak of your love and grace
through what we say and do,
that we may be your witnesses.
Amen.

READING THE SCRIPTURES

Read together the Bible passage: **Acts 1:6-11**

Background Information:

The Ascension is recorded by the same author in both Luke's Gospel (Luke 24:50-52) and the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:6-11), but in Acts we are given a little more information. The Gospel of Luke is like the first half of a play focussing on the life of Jesus, and Acts is like the second half (or sequel) focusing on the Holy Spirit and the growth of the church. Although the Ascension of Jesus is a key moment – his physical departure from earth – there is just a fleeting reference in Mark's Gospel (Mark 16:19), and it doesn't appear at all in John or Matthew. Is this something to be worried about? Compare this to Jesus' arrival on earth: only Matthew and Luke give us accounts of his birth. The Gospels are comfortable covering different ground, written by different authors to bring different perspectives and focus.

Before Jesus ascends into heaven, he reminds the disciples that they will receive the Holy Spirit, and tells them that they should be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. These are the final words that Luke records of Jesus before Jesus ascends to heaven. The disciples are looking longingly into the sky, gazing up to heaven, no doubt wondering where Jesus has gone, and really not believing what has happened! Is it any wonder then that angels are sent to remind them that they are not meant to be gazing up into the sky, they need to be witnesses, continuing his story on earth.

One of the early Christian fathers, Saint Augustine (354-430) said: "*You ascended before our eyes, and we turned back grieving, only to find you in our hearts.*" It is because Jesus ascends that the promised Holy Spirit comes in power at Pentecost, giving birth to the Church. And now it is our responsibility to keep telling the story of Jesus.

DIGGING DEEPER

The angels encouraged the disciples to stop looking for Jesus in the clouds. *Who are the people who have encouraged you (or nudged you) in your faith journey, or in your life in general? What impact did that encouragement have? Who might you need to encourage?*

In what ways would you like to be bolder or more courageous in the sharing of your faith, or in evangelism (telling the good news of Jesus)?

How will you be a witness so that the story can continue?

Where might Jesus be calling you? Or what might he be calling you to do? How can you test that call? What role can the fellowship of the church have in affirming or guiding you?

You might like to also read **Ephesians 1:15-23** (perhaps at home for further reflection). The Ascension tells us that Jesus is now given authority as the Lord of all. *How do you imagine the risen Jesus in heaven, and what is he doing? How does our calling as the church relate to God's plans for the world?*

ACTIVITY

Think about how you can be a witness; how you can share your faith with those around you. Practice what you might say with those in your group. Tell your 'faith-story'. If you can be confident in talking about Christ and your faith in this group, then this may also give you confidence to speak to others.

PRAYING TOGETHER

Ascension Day also marks the beginning of *Thy Kingdom Come*, an international prayer movement (Ascension to Pentecost), where we are invited to particularly pray for people we know who don't know Jesus. You may like to write the name of five people that you want to pray for during this time.

Pray together for opportunities to be witnesses of God's love and to have the boldness to share your faith-story, and the difference that Jesus has made to your life. As you share **the Lord's Prayer** together, think about the words 'Thy Kingdom Come', and what we are actually praying for.