

## THE SCENE OF CHRIST'S ASCENSION

Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)

*And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven.*

—*Luke 24:50-53*

**O**ur Lord Jesus, having spoiled the grave, and so proved His power over things that are under the earth, tarried for forty days among men and so claimed His power over the earth itself. [He] then ascended through the air to show that the dominion of the prince of the power of the air was broken and, finally, entered the heaven of heavens to claim sovereignty there, so that, from the lowest depths up to the extremest heights, He might take possession of His vast domains. I like to think of Him as traversing<sup>1</sup> His dominions from end to end, like a conqueror looking over the provinces that have been subdued by His might. Our Lord did not make a rapid passage through the world. He might have gone on the resurrection morning straight from the grave, as soon as it was opened, into His glory; but He had reasons for tarrying a while, and of those reasons I will briefly speak...

His ascension occurred forty days after He had risen from the dead. You know what a significant period forty days has always been in Scripture; and you know that, in our Lord's own case, He was forty days in the wilderness, tempted of the devil, so that it was seemly<sup>2</sup> for Him to tarry here for forty days of triumph on the scene of His first great battle and victory. Whatever instruction there may be in those forty days, I will not attempt to give any fanciful exposition of [their meaning]; but it is quite clear that they were sufficient for certain excellent purposes.

They were sufficient to prove to all mankind that He had truly risen from the dead, not as a phantom,<sup>3</sup> but in real flesh and blood. He made many appearances to His disciples in different ways and in different places. It was not possible that five hundred brethren at once could all be deceived (1Co 15:6); and if that could be imagined, it is

not likely that, when by twos and threes, and even as separate individuals (1Co 15:5, 7-8), they had the most intimate [communication] with Him, they could have been mistaken... The forty days was a sufficient period for our Savior to be here to make it clear to all ages that He had really risen from the dead.

Besides that, I have no doubt He timed His sojourn on earth so that He might remove every lingering doubt from the minds of His disciples. Thomas had to be talked to—to be bidden to put his finger into the print of the nails and to thrust his hand into his Lord's side; and there were others beside Thomas who had many doubts. In fact, there was not one of the disciples without some doubt or other, so their Master had to act and speak in such a way that every one of them should be thoroughly assured as to His identity and as to the nature of His risen body (Mat 28:17). Thus, He said to them, "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have" (Luk 24:39).

Besides that, the instructions that Christ had previously given to His disciples needed a few finishing touches. Before His death, He had said to them, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (Joh 16:12). But after He had risen from the dead, they could bear much more; and there is no doubt that He made disclosures<sup>4</sup> to them then, which let further light into their souls. We read more than once of how He opened their understandings to receive the Scriptures and opened the Scriptures so that their understandings might grasp them.

But, chief of all, our Lord tarried here for forty days that He might issue His commissions to His disciples. He said to one of them, "Feed my sheep," and, "Feed my lambs" (Joh 21:15-17); and He said to all of them, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mar 16:15-16). He would not take His final departure until His last orders were issued, until He had, as it were, marshalled His battalions, set them in their ranks, given them His commands, and bidden them march forward to battle and to victory. There was infinite wisdom in the delay between the resurrection and the ascension; and the more we think of it, the more we shall see that it was so. Thus much<sup>5</sup> concerning the time of our Lord's [visit] here after He rose from the dead.

<sup>1</sup> *traversing* – crossing; passing through.

<sup>2</sup> *seemly* – appropriate; suitable to the occasion.

<sup>3</sup> *phantom* – something that appears to the sight but has no substance.

<sup>4</sup> *disclosures* – acts of making something known or of revealing information.

<sup>5</sup> *Thus much* – so much; to this point.

Further, the spot from which the ascension took place is very instructive. Luke tells us, "He led them out as far as to Bethany" (Luk 24:50); but, in the Acts of the Apostles, he informs us that this memorable scene took place upon "the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey" (Act 1:12). The two statements are not at all inconsistent with one another. I suppose that our Lord was upon that part of the Mount of Olives from which He could look down upon Bethany. To my mind, it is a very beautiful remark that is made by Van Oosterzee<sup>6</sup> upon this incident. He says that when we stand in the place of our Lord's ascension, we have three things: the heaven above us opened, for Christ passed through the golden gates; we have a happy home below, close at our feet, for there was Bethany, where Mary and Martha and Lazarus had their happy abode, and none are so happy as those who are joined to the risen Christ; and then we have here a pathway, often trodden by Christ's blessed feet, and along that pathway the disciples were to go back to Jerusalem—the very Jerusalem out of which He had led them for His ascension. So that His ascension from this position gives us three beautiful things—an opened heaven, a happy home, and a pathway consecrated and smoothed by His blessed feet.

The most significant circumstance, perhaps, about the place of His ascension was that He went back to heaven from the place where He had often communed with His disciples. He had opened many mysteries to them there. It was there that they had sat and looked over at Jerusalem, and He had spoken to them about the ultimate destruction of the guilty city (Mat 24:1-51; Mar 13:1-37). It was a place that was very dear to them and that must have brought many memories to our Savior's mind. There, just under the brow of the hill, were the olive trees of Gethsemane; and His eyes may have looked upon the spot where He wrestled for our sakes with all the powers of death and hell (Mat 26:36-46; Mar 14:32-42). It is sweet to think that He ascended to His glory from the place of His agony and bloody sweat (Luk 22:44); and, my brethren, we shall do the same in our measure. From the bed whereon we die, we shall ascend into glory! And there we shall be transfigured and made like unto our Lord; from the grave of death—our Gethsemane—our bodies shall leap, at the coming of the Lord and the sounding of the great trumpet, into all the resurrection beauty and life. Yes, where we fight, we shall conquer; where we suffer, there we shall reign. I like to think of the last spot of earth that

<sup>6</sup> Jan Jacob van Oosterzee (1817-1882) – Dutch theologian.

Jesus touched being a mountain—for mountains have often been the places where the grandest transactions of men with God have been performed—and to find Him going as near heaven as He could upon His feet because He would not work a miracle as long as anything could be done by ordinary means. And then gently, as it were, pushing the earth downwards and Himself ascending into the glory where He now sits at the right hand of God, even the Father.

Think over the time and the place of our Lord's ascension, and you will have some subjects worthy of your deepest meditation.

Then think of the scene itself. There are Christ's disciples gathered around Him, the apostles certainly, and perhaps some more of His followers. They have come out to Bethany and Olivet from Jerusalem. I cannot tell whether they walked through the streets at midday. I think it is very likely; and if so, many must have stared wonderingly at the Nazarene, Whom they had seen nailed to the cross on Calvary, now alive again and passing through their streets. Whether it was so or no, I cannot tell. They crossed the Kedron, that gruesome brook in which the defilements of the Temple were taken away; and then they passed by Gethsemane by the winding path, until they came to the brow of Olivet where Jesus could look down on the one side on Jerusalem, and on the other side on Bethany; and He began to talk with His disciples....How astonished His disciples must have been! How they must have shrunk back as the majesty flamed forth from Him! He began to rise, and up He went—slowly, majestically rising, and the disciples looking on until He must have grown less and less to their astonished vision; and when He was about to vanish from their sight, they saw a cloud float between Himself and them, and He was gone—gone to His throne.

I like to think of our Lord's ascension in this simple but sublime manner...It is, to my mind, very beautiful to think of there being no medium employed in connection with His ascension—no angels' wings to bear Him upward, no visible arm of omnipotence to lift Him gently from the earth...No, but He rises by His own power and majesty. He needs no help. Glad would the angels have been to come once more to earth as they had come at His birth, as they had come to the wilderness, as they had come to His tomb. Gladly would they have ministered to Him, but He needed not their ministry, at least, in the beginning of His journey. He proved the innate power of His deity,<sup>7</sup> by which He could depart out of the world just when He willed,

<sup>7</sup> See FGB 230, *The Deity of Christ*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

breaking the law of gravitation and suspending the laws usually governing matter. Well could He do this, for He made those laws and could alter or control them as He pleased. "A cloud received him out of their sight" (Act 1:9), for I suppose they had then seen all that they ought to see; and, perhaps, behind that cloud there were scenes of glory that it was not possible for human eyes to gaze upon, and words that it was not lawful for human beings to hear. I do not know about that...

There does seem to be some guide to us in that matchless 24<sup>th</sup> Psalm: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in" (Psa 24:7). It does read as if the warders<sup>8</sup> at the top of the gate enquired, "Who is this King of glory?" and that the attending angels replied, "The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in" (Psa 24:7-9). Of these things, we speak with bated breath,<sup>9</sup> for we know not all that happened then, but we do know that "a cloud received him out of their sight" (Act 1:9)...

What was the posture<sup>10</sup> in which Christ was last seen by His disciples? I will read the words: "He lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven" (Luk 24:50-51), so that the last posture in which Christ was seen was this: His hands were uplifted in the act of blessing His disciples... We are not told much about the action with which our Lord Jesus Christ accompanied His speech. There is one thing recorded of Him in which it would be a great blessing if all ministers would imitate Him: "He opened his mouth, and taught them, saying..." (Mat 5:2). We do not always know how He stood; but, on the occasion of His ascension, we know exactly what His posture was: "He lifted up his hands, and blessed them" (Luk 24:50).

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<sup>8</sup> warders – guards; keepers.

<sup>9</sup> bated breath – holding one's breath in fear, suspense, or awe.

<sup>10</sup> EDITOR'S NOTE: the original word used was *attitude*, an archaic use of *posture*, which has been substituted for modern readers.