**Acts 1:1-11 (ESV)**

**1** In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, **2** until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. **3**  He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. **4** And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; **5** for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” **6** So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” **7** He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. **8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” **9** And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. **10** And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, **11** and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

**“The Ascension Is Relief”**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. Recently, I attended a two-day Spotlight on Ministry entitled, “Thy Kingdom Come: A Focused Seminar for Pastors on Evangelism in a Post-Christian World.” The word “Post-Christian” is no surprise because we can see it all over. Christianity might have been able to easily surf along the waves of the culture but no longer. As one of presenters put it, “Millennials, Gen-Xers, and Baby-Boomers all find themselves emerging in a confusing and very often intimidating world” (Kolb). This means having lost or disregarded the story of salvation promised in Christ for a sinful world. Many have lives that are now senseless or hold on to a false sense of reality.

A gut reaction is to ask, “What are we going to do?” However, the book of Acts or the story of what God’s people did with the Gospel does not start out looking at the works of men for salvation. First, it takes into account looking at the Savior Jesus and His ascension. If judgment came by rain for forty days flooding the world in the time of Noah, how much more would the good news of Jesus during those forty days after His resurrection flow out to the ends of the earth. Everything rests in the justifying principle of faith alone in Jesus apart from works of the Law. What seemed strange, complex, and unfruitful for the earliest Christians had an answer. The ascension of Jesus is relief continuing His work even with us in this senseless world.

If there is ever any relief, it must always go back to Jesus. “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” St. Luke wrote Acts, but he wants all of us to take note of His account of the Gospel. Relief can rest in nothing else than the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He alone is both God and Man born of the Virgin Mary. He alone is the Savior able to redeem sinners judged by the Law. He alone is the Sacrifice sent by the Father out of love. The whole story of Acts stands on the apostles and all this looks to the Gospel recorded by Luke standing on Jesus.

Going back to Jesus means going back to relief in the Gospel. Before His ascension, the risen Savior made this known to be all over Scripture. “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Luther tells us what is at work by this Gospel saying,

“I would much rather have people say that I preach to sweetly and that it hinders people from good works… than that I failed to preach faith in Christ and there was no help or consolation for timid, fearful consciences. For what I am seeing and encountering now are people who are lax and careless, falsely boasting of their faith, claiming that they rely on God’s grace and mercy to help them, even though addicted to sin. But as soon as they are really laid low it turns out that they never rightly grasped and believed in God’s grace and mercy. We will have our hands full in cheering up a person and comforting him, when he has already become entangled in some form of idolatry” (House Postils, Vol.6 115).

Only Jesus’ Word of salvation speaks against the Laws demands. Only Jesus’ suffering and death calls out repentance to trust in Him. Only Jesus’ resurrection gives hope of life by His Name. Acts lays out the ascension right from the start because Christ stands over an idolatrous and senseless world with the Gospel.

Of course, this relief going back to Jesus is no dead story, an end in itself, or passing a moment of time. The ascension concludes Jesus’ earthly ministry, but it was only the beginning. The longer name for the book of Acts from Greek is “The Acts of the Apostles.” Some have also called it, “The Gospel of the Holy Spirit” and others, “The Demonstration of the Resurrection” (Kretzmann 532). Jesus would leave His disciples but not without first connecting them to this promise. “You heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” This meant His work and teaching would continue regardless of what things would look like or how they would play out before a sinful world. There was no power or special strength in the disciples, but as you know, Pentecost would bring relief to that picture. The Holy Spirit would fill them with what they needed to proclaim Jesus’ Name to the ends of the earth.

Relief is an answer right in our life by Jesus. It means we hear, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.” Just like the disciples, we want to know how things will turn out. Yet, Jesus is far from done with our life. He lets none relax from His redeeming love as Savior and Lord. Baptism is not an isolated event of my past apart from the Spirit still at work in the present. Neither do I have my own spiritual life apart from the same Spirit worked for all by Jesus in baptism. St. Paul said, “And God put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” This means we have come into a new kind of kingdom ruled by an eternal king who has ascended on high. The Holy Spirit is at work by the Word giving us relief by forgiveness, keeping us in faith to Jesus, and leading us in good works. What we are is what Jesus said the Spirit would make us. “…You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Proclaiming the Gospel is now to a world confused and lost just like in the beginning of Acts, so it is now at the end as the answer for our time.

That seems impossible in what we see today, but relief comes by lifting up eyes to the joy in Jesus. “And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” There was no departure from His disciples only the dedication that Jesus would be with them. To sit at the right hand of the Father means He exercises all power. As God and Man, He is everywhere able to be in His Word, in His Supper, and in the lives of His saints. The Church may appear weak on earth bearing the cross, but Christ the head reigns with all power as our promise, defense, and guide. What unfolds in Acts for us to see came from what the apostles already saw fully in the ascended Jesus. “And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.”

Relief is an answer with right joy resting in Jesus. Like at the tomb, there were angels preaching the Word at the ascension to give faith. “And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” The pain of Jesus lifted upon the cross was put out of sight by none lifting Him up into heaven. If there is to be joy, it will at last come by Jesus. The book of Acts is the life of the Church for all time until there is only one answer for all eternity. What Christ graciously continues now in our sight, He will finally end in the same way He went. The ascension of Jesus is relief continuing His work even with us in this senseless world. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting, Amen.