

[That's \(Not\) All, Folks...!](#)

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By Rev Paul Graham



Tomorrow is Ascension Day. To many Baptists, unused to such structures as the church calendar, this may often pass us by. The anniversary of Jesus' finishing his earthly ministry can risk being ignored, usually because it falls during the week, rather on a convenient Sunday. Of course, in a few days' time we will arrive at Pentecost Sunday, and that's a much more convenient day and occasion to mark. Let's face it, whatever we may think about the Holy Spirit, we can at least acknowledge the birthday of the church!

But Ascension Day is a truly remarkable day in many other ways. For one thing, it shows an enormous act of faith. Not, for once, on the part of the disciples, whose own faith had been tested over the span of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection. This time, we see the faith that Jesus has in his disciples. Jesus had given them opportunity to take baby steps into life without him when he sent them out into the towns and cities (c.f. Matthew 10, Luke 9 & 10), but the Ascension marks a watershed moment where faith is truly put to the test.

Like Elvis, Jesus has left the building. The promise of the Holy Spirit is all that the disciples can hold onto for the future. Not knowing how the rest of the book of Acts would play out, they would have left the mountain-top with only an upper room to return to. Not knowing what form the Holy Spirit would take (another Messiah?) or when it/he/she would arrive (how long?), there wasn't a great deal to go on.

But this is the depth and risk of faith that Jesus showed in these men and women. It was certainly a risk; who could tell if they would stay in the threat-filled city or, like Peter only a short while before, head back to the comfort of the lake and fishing net? The following few days would tell...

I wonder what the mood was among the disciples as they left the mountaintop. The reading is, as is often

the case, slightly unhelpful in its lack of description here. We're left speculating about this, but I highly doubt that they went on their way rejoicing. I imagine their journey back to Jerusalem as being a long hard slog. You'd think that the descent from the summit would be easier than going up, but I think that their feet would have dragged, unwilling to leave that fateful spot. Far from the public gaze, I wonder how often they turned back to see if Jesus was still there, wondering where they had got to. But no, there was no repeat of the sudden reappearances of the last few weeks; even back in their room in Jerusalem Jesus didn't suddenly appear in their midst.

Let's understand that day in the context of today. The disciples have been left, without the security and reassurance that would have come with being with Jesus. They could well have felt invincible; after all, even death hadn't been able to hold Jesus down. But now they feel anything but.

I find parallels between us in our current state and those disciples. We've lost a lot of the comfort that we derived from the simple pleasures of being together in one place, whether that's in church or with family members. We might even feel abandoned by God, such is the depth of feeling that has been expressed. I think that the disciples trudging back to the city would empathise.

Of course, we know what happened next for them and how the advent of the Holy Spirit launched what has evolved into what we now call church. For us, though, we're still waiting in the upper room; unsure of what the future will hold. Some of us are wondering what church will look like when the Government guidance enables us to start meeting again. How will that work, how often shall we meet, what can we do, will we ever have tea and coffee after the service again? These are all crucial questions for another time.

Another question is, what is God going to do? I whole-heartedly believe that God's Holy Spirit is right in the thick of it today; ministering to those who are sick, comforting those who are grieving and offering peace to those who are troubled. But what next? Are we going to receive an out-pouring of God's Holy Spirit, meeting us in our grief and confusion and taking us into some glorious new future with him?

The disciples had to stop relying on the presence of the resurrected Jesus in order to deal with the reality of each day, while waiting for an unknown future. Jesus placed his faith in them that they would stick around to see something wonderful; dangerous, but wonderful.

We've had to stop looking at the reliable structures of old in order to deal with the grim reality of the coronavirus pandemic. Jesus has faith in us that we're going to keep going through this. What the future holds we don't know, but we can cling onto the promise that God is going to be right at the heart of it. Are we willing to stick around...?

(Photo by [Max Böhme](#) on [Unsplash](#))