

## SERMON 17<sup>th</sup> May 2026 **The Ascension of the Lord**

*Blessed are you, Lord God, King of all creation: You have taught us by your Word. Open our hearts to your Spirit and lead us on the paths of Christ, your Son. All praise and glory be yours forever. Amen.*

Did you use to watch Star Trek on TV? If you did, you'll remember the line, perhaps the show's most famous line, "Beam me up, Scottie!"

If you don't know, Star Trek was a TV series in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, about the crew of a spaceship journeying to the final frontier of space, meeting other worlds and other life on the way. When the crew visited these worlds, they would go there by some clever science that disassembled their bodies, reducing them to cells and beaming them down to the planet where they would be reassembled. When they had to return to their ship, and safety if they were in trouble or being pursued, they would radio-up and ask to be beamed up, "Beam me up Scottie" became a catch phrase. Scottie would pull a lever, and their bodies would be reduced to cells, and beamed up to the ship where they would be reassembled.

I wonder if you have ever used the catchphrase 'Beam me up Scottie' in your life. When the going gets tough in this world, in your life, do you ever wish you could be beamed up, out of the way of trouble, to safety in a celestial spaceship orbiting above the world.

What do you do when the going gets tough? Do you wish to be beamed up?

Perhaps you weren't a Star Trek fan. If not, then no beaming up for you, you are going to have to stay in this world and face the music. But, perhaps, instead, you were a fan of Westerns. Westerns were Cowboy and Indian films set on the frontier of 19<sup>th</sup> century America. I liked them, especially when the cavalry arrived. They would come charging over the hill on their horses in good order, dressed smartly in their blue uniforms, with their flags flying and their trumpet sounding to save the day for the cowboys who were beset by murderous Indians.

Which did you prefer, to be beamed up, or to wait for the cavalry? Or neither. Perhaps, instead, you would enjoy the film, *Don't Look Up*, which was released in 2021, and is about a comet that will destroy earth. Two scientists try to warn the world – "There is a 100% chance that we are all going to die!" they declare to anyone who will listen, but they are met with widespread ignorance, media apathy, and political denial. In the face of disaster, we all bury our heads in the sand is the satirical point of this film.

When trouble hits, what should we do? Ask to be beamed up? Call for the cavalry? Bury our heads in the sand? Which do you prefer, Star Trek, a good Western, or something more modern, satirical, and darkly funny like *Don't Look Up*? Perhaps, I could refine the question a little because after all we are in church this morning, we are disciples of Jesus Christ, we are Christians, so I could ask, not so much which do you prefer, Star Trek, a Western, or a satire, but which of these should we prefer, as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ?

The answer to which we should prefer, is found in our readings this morning. The first disciples of Jesus, it turns out, had they been alive in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, would have sat down in front of the TV to watch and enjoy all three. They would have binge watched, first Star Trek, then *Don't Look Up*, then a good Western.

We know this because the Gospel writer Luke who wrote not only the Gospel called Luke, but also the book called Acts from which we heard this morning, had a problem. Luke is the only Gospel writer to emphasise Jesus' physical body following his resurrection. Mark only records an empty tomb and an announcement of the resurrection; Jesus is not seen in that Gospel. Matthew records the disciples seeing Jesus, twice, but not touching him. The resurrected Jesus in John's Gospel is a spiritual presence with the power to appear and disappear before the disciple's eyes.

The resurrected Jesus in Luke's Gospel, on the other hand, goes so far as to ask the disciples to touch him so that they will be convinced of his physical presence. But, that physical, bodily, post-resurrection Jesus leaves Luke with a problem because as Jesus is clearly no longer with us, what happened to him, where did he go? It's no surprise to find that it is only in Luke that we hear about Jesus' ascension. Luke writes, in our reading from Acts this morning, "as they [the disciples] watched, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud removed him from their sight."<sup>1</sup> Where did Jesus go? He was lifted into the clouds.

All problems, as we know, are not just challenges to be overcome, they are also opportunities to be grasped. And Luke, presented with his problem, what happened to the body of the resurrected Jesus, grasps an opportunity. The opportunity it gives him is not so much a way of telling us what happened to Jesus, but a way of telling us what happened to Jesus' disciples, and thereby a way of telling us, his readers, what we should also do as Jesus' disciples in this world.

So rather than focusing on Jesus as '... he was lifted up, and a cloud removed him from their sight,' Luke wants us to focus on the disciples and what they did when that happened. Faced with the tough time ahead of them, of living in the world as followers of Jesus without Jesus being there, the disciples behaved like we all do when trouble comes, they did three things; they yearned to be beamed up, they longed for the cavalry to come, and they buried their heads in the sand.

First, they wanted to be beamed up with Jesus. Luke writes, 'As he was going, ... they [the disciples] were gazing intently into the sky...'<sup>2</sup> This gaze may be just consternation at the incredible event they are witnessing, but not so, for they are immediately sternly rebuked for doing so. Luke writes, '... all at once there stood beside them two men in white who said, 'Men of Galilee, why stand there staring up to the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken away from you up to heaven, will come in the same way as you have seen him go.'<sup>3</sup>

Stop staring up into the sky. For those of us who are followers of Jesus Christ, the answer to our troubles in this world is not to gaze longingly at the heavens wishing we could be anywhere but here. Stop staring up into the sky.

We might think, then, that what we should do is wait for Jesus to return and save us from our troubles and afflictions in this world, much like the cowboys in Westerns hope for the cavalry will ride over the hill to rescue them. It would be understandable, after all the men in white promised those first disciples that Jesus would return.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1: 9

<sup>2</sup> Acts 1: 10

<sup>3</sup> Acts 1: 10 - 11

Indeed, Luke tells us that those first disciples, after hearing the men in white tell them this, ‘...returned to Jerusalem and they went to the room upstairs where they were lodging...’<sup>4</sup> There they went, back into their room, hidden from the world, their heads in the sand, waiting for the cavalry to come.

For Luke, the writer of Acts, this is where the drama of his book really begins. With the disciples in the room, fearful and questioning, he now has a stage setting for what will come next, what we will celebrate next, Pentecost, and the giving of the power of the Holy Spirit, something Jesus had promised the disciples in the first half of our Acts reading this morning. When the disciples had asked Jesus whether the time had come when Jesus would establish his sovereignty, Jesus had told them that dates and times were not for them to know. Instead, their job would be to bear the Gospel witness to the ends of the earth.

That is the fourth option, and it is the one that we are called to take. It is not for us to stare wistfully and longingly into the sky wishing that we were somewhere else when trouble arrives at our door, wishing to be beamed up. When trouble arrives at our door, it is not for us to lock ourselves away in our room, to stick our heads in the sand and ignore what is happening around us. When trouble arrives at our door, it is not for us to put our feet up and pray for Jesus’ return, for the cavalry to come riding to our rescue

It turns out that the cavalry is us, we are the resurrected Jesus on earth today, and we are called to stop staring into the sky and start looking around us; to stop hiding in our rooms and to go out into the world; to stop expecting someone else to save us, and instead to face the world with all its temptations, sufferings, terrors, and troubles. After all, that is what Jesus did himself. He only ascended to heaven after he had walked the road to the cross in service of others, suffered what he had to suffer, was executed and died, and discovered that in the darkest night was the dawn of the resurrection.

Peter, one of those disciples, and the author of the second Bible reading we read this morning, would himself learn this lesson, and pass it on in his letter. ‘My dear friends, he wrote, do not be bewildered by the fiery ordeal that is upon you, as though it were something extraordinary. It gives you a share in Christ’s sufferings...’<sup>5</sup>

It is comforting to think that God will take all our troubles, and the world’s troubles, away from us with a wave of a wand, or that we can lock ourselves away, ignore them all, and wait for him to act, while imagining ourselves elsewhere, anywhere but here.

But, not for those first disciples. They were about to be filled with such a spiritual power, a holy spirit, the Holy Spirit, which would spark courage in them such as they had never felt. That spirit of holiness lives in us too, and will be with us when we step outside this morning to face the world and our lives. For our place is not in heaven, not yet, nor is it locked away in here ignoring the world and our lives and the troubles that surround us, and nor is it anxiously looking for a saviour to come sometime soon. Our place is out there, in the world, and in our lives confronting it all with the Gospel of love and peace, justice and mercy until we are called to another world and another life.

*Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.*

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 1: 12 -- 13

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 4: 12