**Rotation.org Writing Team Lesson Set**

**The Great Commission and Ascension of Jesus**

**Bible Background and Lesson Objectives**

**Scripture for this Lesson Set**

[**Matthew 28:16-20**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+28%3A16-20&version=NRSV)**"The Great Commission"** *Excerpt: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...."*

[**Acts 1:1-11**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%201:1-11&version=NRSV)**Luke's second account of the Ascension of Jesus***Excerpts: "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere...."  (***and)***After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud...."***(then)***“two white-robed men suddenly stood among them."  "Men of Galilee,” they said, “why are you standing here staring into heaven?"*

**Lesson Objectives**

Each student will gain...

* A working memory of Jesus' words in the Great Commission from Matthew 28, Jesus' "final instructions" to his disciples.

We don't often stress scripture memory in these sets, but this is one of those passages that summarizes many important things so succinctly and is so well-known and often quoted in the Church, that we want our students to know it well. To wit, you'll see a lot of great "memory hook" activities in the lessons of this set.
* A  basic knowledge about the meaning of each keyword or phrase in Jesus' Great Commission "instructions," and be able to share examples of how they are *or could be* following that instruction.

For reasons explained below, the Great Commission is the focus of this set, and the Ascension less so.

**Why Teach the Great Commission and Ascension of Jesus?**

**The “Great Commission” and “Ascension of Jesus” answer the question "WHAT DO WE DO NOW?"**  They are the resurrected Jesus' final instructions to his Disciples and the promise that the Holy Spirit (Jesus' and his Father's Spirit!) will guide them and move them to action.

While the wording of Jesus' instructions and the details of his Ascension vary between the Gospels, each Gospel's ending, and the beginning of Acts, share a common message:

***Jesus is still with us,
We are not alone.
It's time to get to work!
And the Spirit is here to help you.***

**Bible Background**

Each Gospel tells a different story about what happened to Jesus after the Resurrection. But as we will see, they all address the same important question, **"What do we do now?** and **How will we be able to do it?"**

**In essence,** these are the same questions at the end of every Sunday School lesson.
What now? and How?

Unlike many other stories shared between the Gospels, the endings of Matthew, Luke, and John each have their own unique details about what Jesus said and did after the Resurrection.

* In Matthew's Gospel, the Disciples are told to "go, baptize, teach*,* ...*And remember I will be with you always*...." etc. **but Matthew has no Ascension story**. There's no standing around watching Jesus go.
* At the end of Luke, and at the beginning of Luke's Book of Acts, there is an Ascension story with only simple instructions. **There is no "Great Commission" in Luke or Acts.** In his Acts version of the Ascension, Luke adds the detail about the two angels appearing to tell the Disciples to stop standing around looking in the sky for Jesus and go wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit.
* In John's Gospel, Jesus briefly talks to the Disciples in the upper room. **In John, there is no "great" commission or Ascension.**
* We did not include Mark's ending for reasons explained in a little bit.

Yet the Great Commission and Ascension belong together as one story. They are the first to "acts" of a three-act story that culminates in the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). For the purposes of teaching these stories to children, we will thus be ignoring some of the differences between the Gospel accounts for two reasons. First, children need a clear and logical narrative. And second, because together they point to the big question all four Gospels arrive at — the "what now?"  ...what we as disciples are supposed to be doing now that Christ has risen.

**The Great Commission: *What disciples are supposed to do.***

*The Great Commission answers the question "what are disciples supposed to do after the Resurrection?"*

* What do we do with the knowledge of Easter?
* Who and how do we follow now that Jesus' body is gone?
* Where is Jesus in our lives?
* What is Jesus calling us to do?

*See the Question Bank" at the end of this background for some great questions to ask students.*

Matthew, whose "Great Commission" we will focus on in this lesson set, places Jesus’ final instructions on a mountaintop in Galilee. They are arguably some of the most eloquent verses in all the Gospels:

Matthew 28:16-20
Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

***Go, disciple, baptize, teach, and remember I'm with you.***

 **The Ascension: *Don't Just Stand There!***

**Luke tells the story of the Ascension twice, while Matthew and John don't mention it.** Only Luke seems to be interested in telling people where Jesus' body went after the Resurrection. But even for Luke "where did he go?" isn't really the point. The point is voiced by the angels in Luke's second version of the Ascension found in Acts 1: "Don't just stand there looking in the sky!"

 “*While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring into heaven*?’” (Acts 1:11)

And then the angels tell the Disciples to go get ready for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Luke, Acts, Matthew’s Great Commission, and Paul's letters all teach us that our faith needs to be LED BY THE SPIRIT if we are to follow through on Jesus' instructions to love, forgive, and bring peace.

**A Spirit-led faith makes you want to go tell others, welcome them into the family of God (baptize), share Jesus' words of life (teach) and trust that Jesus is *with us now and always.***

Jesus' final "Great" words and his Ascension are like the call to the Pentecost starting line.

Like those first disciples, we hear and believe, and then by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are joyfully propelled into the world to tell others the Good News.

**Question Bank**

* What does it mean to "witness" about Jesus?  What are the non-verbal ways we "witness" about Jesus? (actions, choices, attitudes)
* Name 10 places that are part of the "everywhere" Jesus commissioned us to tell the Good News.
* What is the Good News about Jesus? ...about your sins? ...about your life?
* Why would people “stand around” instead of doing what Jesus asks them to do?
* In what ways do people “stand around” at home, among their friends, at church, at school, when they see needs? When someone is hurt?
* What are some of the excuses people use for "standing around" and not following through on what Jesus asked them to do?
* How do you know what Jesus wants you to do?  (Read Matthew 28!  Pray. Listen. Get involved.
* What are you doing to “tell” (show, demonstrate) others about the Messiah?
* How do you “receive the Holy Spirit”?
* Focusing on helping to bring the Kingdom, rather than “get into heaven.”
* What are some other words for "Go"? (therefore)
* What are the "nations" of people we are asked to share Jesus with? (Don't just think of countries.)
* What does it mean to baptize someone "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit?"
* What are you doing (or could be doing) to "teach" your siblings, friends, family members about life, love, forgiveness?
* How do know Jesus is "with you always"?
* What is "the end of the age”?

**The Case of the Missing Ascension Stories**

**As mentioned, Matthew and John have no Ascension story.** From a storyteller’s point of view, they are like books without a neat ending. ***What happened to Jesus’ body?*** Only Luke seems to know the Ascension story, or feel it is important enough to include in both his Gospel and Book of Acts.

**Why didn't Matthew and John record an Ascension story?**
We don't know, but by the time of their writing, Jesus' body was indeed gone, and many were expecting him to return. Luke's Gospel thus addresses the question that was surely on the minds of many: "where and how did he leave?" But as we are learning, there are more important questions.

**Mark’s Ascension story or lack thereof…** It is widely accepted by Bible scholars that the reference to the Ascension in Mark 16:9-20 was a later addition, probably by a scribe in the 2nd Century A.D. The earliest manuscripts do not include it. Was there an original ending that went missing? Nobody knows. But what the later addition DOES tell us is that by the 2nd Century A.D. Luke's Gospel ending was considered the standard.

The lack of Ascension details in Matthew and John are another reminder that their inspired human authors were probably not the original disciples–as one can imagine that the "original" Matthew and John would have included such a spectacular personal experience!  But they don’t. Instead, it is left to Luke, a Gentile convert and disciple of Paul writing some 40 years after the Resurrection, to preserve the story of Christ’s ascension that was circulating in those early days.

**The earliest Christian writing we have comes from Paul's 1st letter to the Thessalonians.** Written around 52 A.D., it reveals that "What Now?" and "Don't Just Stand There!" were issues that the first Christians were talking about. Paul praises the Thessalonian Christians for “sharing their joy.” *“…wherever we go we find people telling us about your faith in God.*” (I Thes 1:8) The Thessalonians were people who were following Jesus' final instructions to "be witnesses," and "go make disciples." But intertwined with Paul's praise, and expressed more energetically in his 2nd letter to them, Paul warns against complacency and laziness among those **waiting around for Jesus’ return, ...waiting to see his body**. In essence, **Paul exhorts the early Christians to live like Jesus never left.** “*We urge you in the name of the Lord Jesus to live in a way that pleases God….*” (1 Thes 4:1)

To Paul and early Christians, Jesus hadn't left them. The sight or location of his body was irrelevant because his Spirit—the Holy Spirit was alive and well, and dwelling among them.

So the "missing" stories or details are only odd until you see a larger truth. What mattered MOST to Matthew, John, Luke, Paul, and the early Church was that Jesus was still alive and present, and calling them to a new way of living. **The dispensation, disposal or location of Jesus’ body was (and is) irrelevant to those who feel his presence and know he is alive.** This is the one thing Matthew, Luke, John, and Paul all agree on in different expressions and places within their writings –that *Jesus is still with us.* The Doctrine of the Trinity which emerged in the early Church made that clear.

**BTW: Where did the Ascension happen?**
Strangely, Matthew 28 puts Jesus on a mountain in Galilee (not the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem as Luke states), where Jesus issues his “great commission.” But Matthew ends it there with no ascension into heaven.  The setting sure ***sounds*** like Luke's Ascension story, but Matthew does not include Ascension details. This is puzzling until you look at the very last statement Jesus makes in Matthew, “*Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*.”  Imagine if Matthew’s Jesus had said “*I’m always with you*,” and then Matthew had ended with, “*and then he went up to heaven*.”  Such fascinating questions remind us that the Gospels are not *news reports, and that there were differing details about Jesus floating around in those early days.*

**More on Jesus' "Final Instructions"**

Though we are concentrating on Matthew 28's "Great Commission" passage, it is important to note that both Luke and John also preserve remembrances of Jesus' “final instructions,” albeit, with different words and context.

In **Luke** 24:48, Jesus’ final words to the Disciples **take place on the Mount of Olives outside of Jerusalem.** They are to preach the forgiveness of sins to all nations in his name and to expect the Spirit.  Luke takes a second crack at Jesus' final words when he writes the Book of Acts, saying, "*And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8)

**John 20** places Jesus' final instructions in the story of Jesus’ appearance in the upper room. *“…he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. …and he said, “Peace be with you.****As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.****” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.*”  Then later in John 21, the Risen Jesus tells Peter to “feed my sheep.” (But there is no Ascension story.)

**In Matthew,** Jesus' last words are "I am with you always...."   But I think we can understand why Matthew didn't include it. Hard to imagine Jesus saying "I'm with you always" then leaving!

**John's Gospel** also leaves the question of "where did he go?" up in the air so to speak,  John ends with Jesus sharing a meal with the disciples on the beach, and then the quick conclusion, "*there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would have been written."*

*To these early writers, there was no "end" to Jesus story, only a new beginning.*

Written by Rev. Neil MacQueen for the Rotation.org Writing Team
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