

The Ascension of Christ (this year on Thursday, May 24th)



Luke 24:36-53 Acts 1:1-12

The story of the Ascension of Jesus Christ is told to us by only one New Testament writer – Saint Luke – in both his Gospel, and also the Book of Acts. Only in Acts we are told that 40 days had passed since the Resurrection of Christ. What did Jesus do for 40 days on earth after His resurrection? We are told that He was with His disciples, continuing to instruct them in the kingdom of God – as He always had – and He ate with them. In Luke 24:42 we see the disciples giving Jesus a piece of a broiled fish and honeycomb.

In Acts we are told that He was taken up into heaven in a cloud as His disciples watched. Then two men in white showed up and asked why they were looking up. The two men told them Jesus will come back in the same way as they saw Him go into heaven.

If we look at the icon we see exactly what Saint Luke told us happened – and much more. We know that the disciples were together when this happened. But how many disciples of Christ were there at the time? Remember, Judas, the betrayer was gone, so there should only be 11. But there are 12 in the icon! The twelfth man is Saint Paul, who was not one of the 12 disciples, but who later became the “Apostle to the Nations” of Christ. The icon becomes an image of the entire Church – not just the one event. In the icon, the Theotokos, her arms raised in prayer and honor to her exalted Son, stands directly below Christ on behalf of the entire Church. In many icons, the two men in white – the angels, are also shown.

One important thing to notice in the icon of the Ascension is that you can't tell whether Jesus is ascending or descending. Is He going up – or is He coming down? That's done on purpose because the two men said Jesus would return in exactly the same way. So this icon could also be an image of the Church waiting for His Second Coming.

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