

Choose Your Own Adventure

Growing up, I read a series of novels called *Choose Your Own Adventure*. They were written as if you yourself were the protagonist of the books. Filled with crazy and wondrous adventures, reading one of these novels was to truly enter another world. But what made them special, what made them compelling, was that they had a variety of possible endings. Every couple of pages, you were forced to make a choice. “Turn to page 37 if you want to bravely head into the deep, dark Mystic Forest, or turn to page 41 if you want to take the safer road home.” Every choice you made led to another series of choices, and so on and so forth, until you reached one of the 30 or so possible endings. It was awesome because you could actually read the book several times over and chart a wildly different path, and reach a different conclusion every single time. Each moment of choice was like a heart-stopping cliffhanger, and as the reader you had to branch out in faith, hoping that the choices you made were going to result in your profit, and not your doom. “You’re the star of the story,” the tagline said. “Choose from over 30 possible endings.”

It’s funny, how connections are made in our minds, but as I pondered this momentous event, when Jesus ascended into Heaven, I kept coming back to those old books. *Choose Your Own Adventure*. Because truly, the Ascension is its own kind of cliffhanger ending. The disciples had to witness the brutal death of their Master, and they felt all of the crushing pain that came with his death. Yet, death was not to have the final word. In defiance of the finality of the Cross, Jesus burst forth from the Tomb. He presented himself in the disciples’ homes, which were actually their prisons of fear, showing up even though the doors were locked, offering them a touch of grace precisely when they needed it. He cooked breakfast for them on the shoreline

after he had guided their nets to a gigantic catch. He fellowshiped with them for 40 days. But then, after a blessing and a promise of greater power, he left them. He left. The one who first left in death was now the one leaving them in life. After all they had experienced, after the emotional roller coasters they had been on, Jesus left them once again. It's like the cruelest of cliffhanger endings. Just when they thought everything was going to be okay, he left them.

But what he left them with, now that is truly something. *"It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* When he had said this, as they were watching, he was *lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*" Yes, he left them physically, his body ascending into heaven. But he didn't leave them rudderless, adrift on a sea of uncertainty. He left them with a mission. He lifted up his hands, blessed them, and commissioned them to carry on his ministry...to continue the wonderworks that he himself accomplished...to go even to the ends of the earth in order to proclaim his saving Gospel.

Yes, he left them physically, and what an emotional cliffhanger that must have been. But, he also left them with a choice. "Will you carry on my ministry, or will you simply return to the lives you once knew?" And we see something of this in the Scriptures themselves. As any human being would do, past, present, or yet to come, when they saw their Lord ascend into heaven, they gazed with eyes wide open to the sky, perhaps full of both anguish and surprise. But their gazing was interrupted by the cutting voices of the angels: *"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."* I imagine this message was delivered not with a sympathetic voice of comfort, but with something more like a tone that said, "Get on with

it. He told you what to do. Don't waste your time waiting around!" And thus, they found themselves in the crucible of choice: do we stay here, waiting, or do we go out to the ends of the world, preaching?

As much of a cliffhanger as the Ascension is, it reveals some incredible truths. As we have prayed in the collect of the day, "*Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things.*" There is nowhere that we can go where Jesus Christ is not present. His Ascension was not simply a physical departure, but it was also his being taken up to the right hand of the Father...transcending those limits of space and time by which we find ourselves constrained. And with this Ascension comes another realization: Jesus Christ is subject to no one, no thing, no power or principality, no earthly dominion or kingdom. St. Paul said as much in Ephesians: "*God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.*" Though the disciples may have been filled with surprise, anguish, and fear, they came to believe that there was actually nothing left for them to fear when they truly believed in the supremacy of Jesus Christ. And because we are in this place today, keeping this feast, we are living proof that the disciples chose not to give into fear. Rather, being awakened from their daze by the voice of the angels, they went to the ends of the earth, preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This supremacy, this Lordship, this absolute victory over death... we too are called to trust in these things and proclaim them with loud voices, even to the ends of the earth. Even if we find ourselves in a similar crucible of choice, being confronted with either fear or faithfulness, we are called to trust more deeply in the power of the Ascended Lord and his

continual presence with us. Jesus once said to his disciples, *“I will not leave you as orphans.”* And the same thing is true today. He is present with us even as he reigns far above any earthly power or principality. So, like those books of my childhood, we get to choose our own adventure. Will you stand in fearful waiting, hoping that the Lord Jesus will come back soon to set us free? Or will you go into the world, preaching and proclaiming his Lordship over all things, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? The choice is yours!