

Psalm 47
Acts 1:1-11

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C
Midway Presbyterian Church
May 22, 2022

The Ascension of the Lord

Introduction to the Psalm

The festival of the Ascension of the Lord celebrates Jesus' ascension to the throne in heaven—seated at the right hand of God the Father. In our Psalm today Israel celebrates God's kingship over all the earth. Listen to these words from Psalm 47...

Introduction to the New Testament Lesson

Luke's gospel tells the story of God's saving activity in Jesus Christ; while Luke's narrative in Acts tells of the saving activity of the Holy Spirit. The Ascension marks the end of Jesus' resurrection appearances and a prelude to the coming of the Spirit. Thereby, we have a transition from Easter to Pentecost. Listen to these words from Acts 1:1-11...

Sermon

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. And the marvelous stained glass windows in many churches tell the story of Christ in the nativity, the crucifixion, the resurrection and the ascension, as well as other events in the scriptures. The Presbytery Meeting that Roz and I attended yesterday was held at the Hartness-Thornwell Memorial Presbyterian Church on the campus of Thornwell Home for Children in Clinton. The chancel window is the children's window, featuring scenes of the life of Jesus as a boy and a man, and his welcoming the children with the words, "Suffer the little children to come to me." (Mt. 19:14)

There is a beautiful depiction of The Ascension of Christ in the chancel of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in Charleston, which shows Christ amid the clouds with his arms raised and two angels at his feet. The stained-glass window is magnificent, warm in hue, and welcoming.

Ascension Day falls on a Thursday each year, forty days after Easter, on the sixth Thursday during the fifty-day period from Easter to Pentecost. That will be this Thursday this year. And the custom of celebrating the Ascension forty days after Easter is largely attributable to the mention of “forty days” in verse three of Acts 1:

To them [that is, the apostles] Jesus presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God.”

We confess in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds our belief in the ascension of Christ: “The third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father almighty.” With this confession it would seem that more emphasis might be given to the ascension. But I suppose that for many, what happened at Easter needed no transition to anything else, or that Easter and The Ascension have been blended into one event. My hope is that today we will gain a greater understanding and appreciation of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ.

David Peter’s mother, Mrs. Betty Peters, was a member of The Episcopal Church of the Ascension in Seneca, South Carolina. Several of us went there for her funeral service in August of 2015. I hope every church can think of itself as “A Church of the Ascension,” in that our Lord’s ascension into heaven will mean something special to the people. I hope every church, no matter its size, can look up to Christ, and truly share his glory. I hope we can all look to him and run with perseverance the race that is set before us, cheered on by that great cloud of witnesses which surround us. As the hymn, “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus,” says:

O soul, are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There’s light for a look at the Savior,
And life more abundant and free!

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

Now there are two things I want to briefly consider in the doctrine of the Ascension.

Then I want to close by looking at Paul's words in verses 22 and 23 of the Epistle to the Ephesians—Paul's words regarding the Body of Christ.

The first thing the Ascension provides is closure to the ministry of Jesus. The Word had become flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. As the child of Mary and Joseph, he grew in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and man. He worked as a carpenter. Jesus was baptized by John in the river Jordan and the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, marking the launch of his earthly ministry. In the wilderness for forty days he was tempted to deny who he was, but overcame the tempter's challenge.

In the power of the Spirit Jesus then went forth to preach good news to the poor. To proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind. To set at liberty those who were oppressed. And to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. But the powers that were, rejected Jesus. Finally, he was betrayed by one of his disciples, and another denied even knowing him, and others forsook him and fled. He was crucified, dead, and buried. And he descended into hell. But on the third day he rose again from the dead. And he began to appear to his followers, presenting himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God.

However, a time came when the resurrection appearances, incomparably precious as they must have been, these appearances came to an end. We might say that the curtain had come down on Act I of the drama. Act II begins with Pentecost, when the promised Comforter, the Holy Spirit comes to continue the story. So the Ascension brings closure to the earthly ministry of Jesus, marking a transition point from Easter to Pentecost.

Secondly, we note that the Ascension declares Christ's enthronement at the right hand of God. "Crown Him with Many Crowns." Philippians tells us that this One who was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. This One found in human form, humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name which is above every name. (2:6-9) Or as we read in the letter to the 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. (Ep. 1:20-21)

Likewise, the Ascension declares Christ's Lordship over all,

...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:10-11)

All hail the power of Jesus' name!
Let angels prostrate fall.
Bring forth the royal diadem,
and crown him Lord of all.

Who is the true King? Not Pharaoh, not Herod, not any foreign potentate. Not any president. Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

Then finally we note what Paul says in the closing verses of Ephesians 1:

And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ep. 1:22-23)

Christ is God's gift to the church. The church is the body of which he is the head. He rules it as he rules all things; but more than that, he imparts to it his fullness. When we despair of the influence of the church, we might remember who is the head of the church. Not the pastor, not the moderator of the General Assembly, not the Pope. Christ, the exalted One is the head of the church. And if we have eyes to see, the exaltation of the head involves of necessity the exaltation of the whole body.

Paul has already indicated in the first chapter of this letter to the church in Ephesians that it was God's purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. So Christ is God's instrument of reconciliation.

William Barclay says that it was to bring all things and all people into one family and one unity that Christ died. But clearly that unity has not yet come to be. Then by analogy he explains the purpose of the Church as the Body of Christ:

Suppose a great doctor, working in his laboratory and in his hospital wards, discovers a cure for cancer. But before it can become available for everyone, and before the sufferers from cancer all over the world can be cured, that cure must be taken out to the world. Physicians must be trained to use it. The cure is there; but the one man who discovered it cannot take it out to all the world. Starting with a few, a great corps of doctors must learn about it and how to administer it. Thus they will be the agents whereby the cure arrives for all the world's sufferers of cancer.

And that is precisely what the church is to Jesus Christ. It is in Christ that all people and all nations can know the cure for alienation...for hopelessness...for sin. It is in Christ. So that the Kingdom of God can be established in the hearts of all people. But before that can happen,

all people must come to know Christ. His truth, his grace, his forgiveness, his love must be brought to all—in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And that is the task of the church. That is our task. To be sure, our Lord will come again. But if we sit staring into heaven looking for Jesus, we won't be his witnesses.

The Ascension. Closure to the earthly ministry of Jesus. Christ's enthronement and Lordship over all. And the Head of the Church, which he calls to be agents of his reconciling love. Let's be a church of the Ascension.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.