

Sermon Ascension 2018

May 13, 2018

Eph. 1:15-23

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Ascension of our Lord Jesus, especially as the apostle Paul speaks of it in his letter to the Ephesians which was our epistle lesson previously read.

“And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” As I was thinking about those words this week, thinking about the Ascension of our Lord, I was reminded of when we were kids in school and we would take helium filled balloons and release them into the air with tags attached with the name and address of our elementary. I thought about that because of the disciples watching Jesus go and the cloud taking Him out of their sight. Now, the language of the cloud taking Jesus out of their sight is significant because it means that He is going into the presence of God, like the pillar of cloud was with the Israelites in the desert, but even still if you’ve ever watched something like a helium balloon go into the sky you can relate. You watch it until you can see it no more. And then what? Then it’s gone, right? As I say that, though, I mentioned the address card with our balloons in school and we would get responses to those. The teacher would indicate on a map where those balloons went and it was always interesting to find out. But thinking of the balloons being gone, those cards were a reminder that we might not have been able to see them, but the balloons didn’t disappear. Instead they were still there, they were just out of our sight.

The ascension can feel like that, though, can’t it? It can feel like Jesus is just not there. It can bring the sense with it that He has gone away, never to return, can’t it? In fact, this not seeing Jesus face to face like the disciples did before He ascended can feel like Law sometimes, can’t it? By that I mean, it can feel like God is showing His condemnation to us. At the worst it can feel like God has left us, doesn’t care for us, and doesn’t want anything to do with us. In fact, it can feel like maybe we have committed some sort of particularly grievous sin, some sin that only God would know about, and He has finally become fed up with us, can’t it? Or maybe not quite as bad, but still heartbreaking, it can feel like Jesus is our knight who has gone off to war. We know that He’s the Knight who can’t be killed, but there’s the worry that surely He’ll find a damsel in distress that He thinks is prettier, or that He fancies more because her purity, or intelligence, or kindness. And we can feel this way, because God’s commands

tell us that this exactly what can happen, really what should happen, don't they? They tell us that the balloon should go off in the distance and we should be left to go back to our lives and endure on our own whatever those lives bring. That's harsh, and it's scary.

But then we hear those words of Paul: **“what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked 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 one to come.”** There's the promise. Jesus isn't just gone, He's been called by His Heavenly Father to be above every rule, and every authority and power and dominion. We look at our government in Illinois. His rule is over them. We look at the US Government. His rule is over them. We look even at tyrannical rulers like Kim Jong Un in North Korea. Jesus's rule is greater than that, and He has all of the authority, all of the dominion over all of these earthly rulers. His power is greater than any human power.

In fact, look at what Paul even says. He says that in the Ascension, the Father, in His great might, **“seated [Jesus] at His right hand.”** Now, on the one hand, the right hand is a symbol of power in general. It is the power of the strong man's strong arm. It is the power of the muscle being flexed and showing just how much brute strength there is. That is the strength that Jesus now has. But there's also the aspect of the right hand position. Are you familiar with that? You know you would see the king on his throne, then who would you see on his left? Usually his queen, right? But then on the right was a special position. On the right was the number two guy in the kingdom. He was the “right hand man.” The man literally on the right of the king. And what was so special about that? This guy was the one who would have the ear of the king. When someone came in to petition their case to the king, that right-hand man could have a strong influence in the case. He could tell the king, “It sounds like this man has been treated unfairly, give petitioner what he asks.” Or he could say, “Listen, I know this guy. He's a knave, don't give him what he wants.”

That's the position that Jesus now has. He has ascended, and He has power, He has the ear of our Heavenly Father, interceding. In fact, something that's especially pertinent as we look at the letter of Paul to the Ephesians is how He understands these rules and authorities, and powers and dominions. One thing that Paul sees in this is that these apply not only to the earthly powers, but to those of the invisible, what you could call the Spiritual realm as well.

That is to say, that when Paul speaks of these, he's not just talking about governments on earth, he's talking about the powers that have dominion over them as well. He's talking about sin, death, and the devil. He's talking about the devil, the ruler of this world, the ruler given dominion by man at the fall. He's talking about how this ruler has imprisoned this world under the power of sin, that is, the power of rebellion against God. He's talking about how that imprisonment is the imprisonment that death brings in the midst of this as the consequence of sin. After all, think about it, this is Ephesians chapter one. Many of you have memorized at least one passage from the book of Ephesians: Ephesians chapter two verses eight and nine. And what do those say? **For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith, and this is the gift of God, and not of yourselves, and not by works so that no one may boast.** You know that verse, you've heard it a thousand times. But do you remember how the chapter starts? **"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."**

You see what Paul is saying is that by Jesus' death and resurrection, in His Ascension, Jesus is now in power over these forces. Paul is saying that as Christ hanged on the cross, He crushed the head of the serpent, the devil. He crushed Him by standing in the place in which sin would be forgiven. He stood in the place where the debt of sin was paid: the death of a man. And in His resurrection, He overcame that death, showing the victory that was His so that death is powerless. After all, without the offense of sin, where's the punishment? And when that punishment is lost, it is overcome. And when the punishment is overcome, the one who would like to bind us in that punishment stands defeated, crushed. All of this is true in the Ascension.

But even as I say all of this, it can still be Law, can't it? It can still bring uncertainty. Perhaps this One with power is against me. Perhaps this One who is over all rules and authorities still is opposed to me. Perhaps I've done something to offend Him. Perhaps when I look at my life, I don't see indications that I have aligned myself with this victor. Sure I have tried and I have tried, but daily I only see failure, and it so easily looks to me I'm still on the side of the ruler of this world, the prince of the power of the air with his spirit of disobedience. Perhaps that's what I see, and so the Lord has gone, and He has gained all of this power only that it would be something that doesn't benefit me. The balloon is gone, where is the card?

Christians, He has sent you His card. As He spoke to the apostles, He told them **“You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”** The card is the Holy Spirit given to the Church. The card is that promise of the word, the promise that the Father **“gave him as head over all things to the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”** In other words, the card is the promise that as you were baptized the Holy Spirit was given to you and you were joined to His body, the Church. It is the promise that when He spoke those words on the cross, **“Father forgive them, they know not what they do,”** He had in mind your sin which you commit in your willful ignorance. It is the promise that when you hear Him say, **“this is my body given for you, my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins,”** you would know that His bleeding and dying paid for your every iniquity.

In other words Christians, the card is the Gospel. His Word, Baptism, His Holy meal, all of this is the card that tells you that His life and death were the atoning sacrifice which has appeased God’s righteous anger against you, so that He’s not mad at you anymore. Instead you live under His Kingdom of Grace, so that His power now works to overcome that darkness in you. It is the card that tells you that His resurrection is your new life in Him in which you walk by His victory. It is the card that tells you that as He has ascended into heaven, you now have the One who intercedes, pleading your case before you even know it in the presence of the King of the whole Universe.

That is to say, Christians, as you hear of the Ascension, you can understand that this isn’t Jesus leaving you to go away. It’s Jesus going to fill all things that He would never leave you, nor forsake you. It’s Jesus showing you that He is with you always to the end of the age, with you in His Word, in His body and blood. With you, working not toward the goal of earthly greatness and wealth, but toward the goal of repentance and faith in Him, that where He is you will be eternally, seeing Him not by faith, but face to face in His Kingdom. Amen.