

“The Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ”

Date: May 24, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Luke 24:44-53

Acts: 1:1-11

Occasion: Ascension Sunday

Themes: Ascension,

When our children were little we liked to play games with them. A childhood favorite was Hide-n-Seek. I would tell them to sit still, and then run into another room and hide – behind a door, behind the sofa, in a closet. Barb would tell them, “Ok, it’s time. Go find Daddy.”

Then they would come into the room and look for me. After looking in a few familiar spots, if they couldn’t find me, they might turn to Barb and ask, “Where’s Daddy?” Even though I was hidden just a few feet from them, they couldn’t see me. I had disappeared, and yet they knew I was still with them.

I suspect this is *something* of how the disciples felt in this passage in the book of Acts. They were with Jesus and they were wondering if he would now restore the kingdom of Israel to its greatness. Jesus did not answer their question. He simply said, “You don’t really need to know when and how everything is going to happen.”

And then he shifted the emphasis from the restoration of Israel to the transformation of their lives. He announced to them that the Holy Spirit would come upon them, and they would be given power to be his witnesses. He told them they would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria and throughout the world.

When he finished speaking, we come face to face with one of the most difficult passages in the Bible, the Ascension of Jesus. Luke tells the story in very simple language. “After saying this, Jesus was taken up to heaven as they watched him, and a cloud hid him from their

sight.” Wow! What are we to make of this? Was Jesus the first astronaut, blasting off into space? What were the mechanics of *how* it happened? If we send a space ship to the right part of the universe, will we discover a body floating around? The modern mind is full of questions.

Luke doesn't feel any need to explain *how* it happened. But can you imagine the impact of the ascension on the disciples? Luke says, “They still had their eyes fixed on him.” Their minds must have been racing and filled with thoughts and feelings.

There must have been some fear and anxiety, as they realized Jesus had left them, and now they were on their own. But, those feelings only lasted for a little while. Gradually, they realized they were not alone. Before, Jesus had dwelt *among* them, but now they believed he dwelt *within* them.

In some ways, Jesus was more real than before he disappeared. He was with them wherever they were – on the dusty roads as they traveled, in their homes when they broke bread together, as they died in Roman coliseums, and as they hid in the catacombs and worshiped the risen Lord.

Though they couldn't see him, yet they felt his presence – they knew he was still with them – just as my children couldn't see me when I was hiding, but they knew I was still there. Jesus was never more present or more real than after that moment when Luke says, “...and he was taken up into heaven as they watched him, and a cloud hid him from their sight.”

Most Protestant churches have not made a big deal out of the feast of the Ascension, but more of us are beginning to pay attention to this important religious holiday on the church calendar. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Anglican Christians have observed it faithfully. United Methodists are a little late in getting to the party and recognizing the importance of the Ascension.

You may be wondering: what practical implications does Christ's ascension really have for our lives as Christians? Why should we pay attention to this event, which we seem to have ignored for so long? What difference does it make for us, in our daily lives? I have several reasons why Christians today should observe and celebrate this special event.

First there is this: The early church thought it was important to remember this event as part of its proclamation that Jesus is *both* risen and exalted. We don't have to understand *how* the ascension worked, scientifically, in order to understand what the church was trying to say: God has exalted Jesus to a place of honor in Heaven.

Jesus is both risen and exalted. Jesus is Lord of all. Let him be Lord of your life. Listen, if Jesus is not exalted and enthroned in your life, something else will assume the throne, something else will take his place.

To say that Jesus is risen *and* ascended to Heaven is to proclaim him Lord of all. In the Apostles Creed we say, we believe "in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, *our Lord*." We also say in that same creed, "On the third day he ascended to heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and dead." Hear that? Jesus is exalted.

The crucified, risen and ascended Jesus is Lord of all, including your life and mine. Praise him; worship him; listen to him; follow him. Let him be Lord. If he is not enthroned in your life, something else will take his place.

Secondly, to proclaim the ascension of Christ is to say that Jesus is no longer bound by time or space. As long as he was present on earth in his physical body he could only be in one place at a time. But now that he has ascended to Heaven and given us his Holy Spirit, Jesus can be everywhere at once.

That means there is *no* place you can go and Jesus isn't already there. It means that Jesus is always available and accessible. You don't have to push through the crowds of people to get his attention. Jesus is now available to each of us, for one-on-one consultations, anytime, no appointment needed. Jesus has no physical boundaries any more.

Third and finally, Jesus is now in Heaven, and we can share that experience with him. In the Apostles' Creed we say "He ascended into Heaven," right? Heaven is the dwelling place of God. Heaven is that place which is totally pervaded by God's glory.

To say that Jesus ascended to heaven is to declare that he has returned to the place of the fullness of God. When he was in the flesh, he left the glory, gave it up and became like you and me. He chose to limit himself in human form. But in returning to heaven he shares in the fullness of God once again.

Now listen to this, because this is exciting. Through his grace, God has made it possible for you and me to live in His presence every moment, so that Heaven actually begins for you and me right now – in this time and space. Think of it, even now while we are *here*, we are also *there* with him.

In John 14:20 Jesus says, "I am in my Father and you are in me, and I am in you." By virtue of our baptism we have been incorporated into Christ. If Christ is in Heaven, in the presence of God, that means that you and I can live there too. Heaven has already begun.

In Galatians 2:20 Paul says, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." You and I are where Jesus is. So, if Jesus is in Heaven, then we too can be in the presence of the fullness of God. We can enter the holy of holies. We are with Christ and Christ is with us. That knowledge should transform us.

Brother Lawrence, was a 17th century monk, who tried to practice living in the presence of God, no matter what he was doing – whether it was washing dishes or saying prayers – he strove to “practice the presence of God.” You and I, dear friends, must learn to pay attention to God, and to pray with St. Patrick:

“Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me.”

May we never forget that the ascension of Christ is the foundation and the guarantee of Christ’s presence with us, always and forever. Amen.