

“Four Days That Change Everything –

Day 3: The Power of the Ascension”

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

May 6, 2018

There is a major Christian festival every year, forty days after Easter, that we Presbyterians tend to overlook. It is called the “Feast of the Ascension,” and Christians have been celebrating it for at least sixteen centuries. In Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition, it is as important as the feasts of the Passion, Easter, and Pentecost. J. S. Bach composed several cantatas and an oratorio specifically for this feast. It commemorates the day, recorded most fully in the book of Acts, when the risen Christ ascended into heaven. The third verse in Acts says that “Jesus appeared to the apostles from time to time” for a period of “forty days” after his death, which is why this event is commemorated on the 40th day after Easter – and that means it’s always on a *Thursday*. That timing on a Thursday is why a lot of denominations, including our own, tend not to make a big deal of this one. It shows up on our liturgical calendar, and sometimes it’s commemorated the following Sunday, but for the most part it basically gets neglected. Which is not how things *should* be. Because the truth of the matter is that this event is of *huge* significance, both in terms of what it means for Jesus, and in terms of what it means for us.

There are three descriptions of the event in the New Testament. Mark says: “When the Lord Jesus had finished talking with them, he was taken up into heaven and sat down in the place of honor on God’s right hand.” (Mark 16:19) Luke says: “Then Jesus led them to Bethany, and lifting his hands to heaven, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven.” (Luke 24:50-51) Acts says: “he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him.” (Acts 1.9) There’s also a brief reference to the event in 1 Timothy, where we are told that Jesus was “taken up in glory.” (1 Timothy 3:16) The wording is similar in all these accounts, and in every case, the verb is passive – Jesus *was taken up*; Jesus *was lifted up*; Jesus *was raised up*; in every case it’s clear that *something is being done to Jesus*. He’s not doing this on his own. *He’s* not the one raising himself up; someone *else* is doing that – and of course, that *someone* is *God*.

Unfortunately, most of our human attempts to depict this event turn out looking somewhat hokey. One of the Jesus movies that was made a number of years ago tried to show it, with a really cheesy-looking Jesus looking lovingly at his disciples as he rises higher and higher off the ground, while the disciples below basically just look stunned and stupid. Artistic depictions tend to be not much better, though great artists like Rembrandt have certainly tried to do it justice. Sheren found some clip art that we considered putting on the front cover of the bulletin, but it looked pretty ridiculous so we left it on the cutting room floor! This is a *huge* event. It’s a shame it so often looks *cheap*.

So let's just stick with what the New Testament tells us. Jesus appeared, in person, in the flesh, both visibly and tangibly, to his followers, in a variety of places and a variety of circumstances, over a period of 40 days following his resurrection. There is mention of those appearances in all four gospels, the book of Acts, and various New Testament letters. I challenge you to try to put them into some kind of chronological order; I don't think it can be done; I think these appearances were so surprising and so varied that even the disciples couldn't keep track of them all. Then, forty days after Easter, Jesus made one last visible/tangible appearance, apparently in Bethany, in the presence of some of his disciples; and those people literally *watched* as God, through some unseen means, drew Jesus back up to the heavenly realm, from whence he had come. He *ascended into heaven*. Never again would he appear both *visibly* and *tangibly* to anyone here on this planet earth, not till the end of the age. Oh yes, there are some people who claim to have *seen* Jesus, and it is entirely possible that Jesus has revealed himself to people in the form of visions – but his *real* presence, so to speak, is not here. It's with God, in heaven.

And what did Jesus *do* after he ascended into heaven? He sat down. Seriously. Mark says he “sat down at the right hand of God.” (Mark 16:19) Ephesians says that God “raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 1:20) Colossians says he is “seated at the right hand of God.” (Colossians 3:1) Romans says he “is at the right hand of God.” (Romans 8:34) 1 Peter says Jesus “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God.” (1 Peter 3:22) The book of Hebrews says that “he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.” (Hebrews 1:3) Jesus himself knew that's where he was going; in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke he tells the Jewish council that they would “see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power.” (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69). Peter tells the whole crowd on the day of Pentecost that Jesus has been “exalted at the right hand of God” (Acts 2:33); he later repeats that to the Jewish leaders after he, too, is arrested. (Acts 5:31) Stephen even sees him there: just before Stephen is killed, he sees Jesus “standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:55-56) Apparently Jesus doesn't always just *sit*; sometimes he *stands*!

Now, of course, there are those who doubt that any of this *really* happened. Some people say it's just a legend, a myth; Jesus didn't *really* rise from the dead, appear to a variety of people in bodily and tangible form, then ascend into the heavens and sit down next to God. Even some contemporary theologians have tried to de-bunk all this, saying that it's nothing more than a symbol or a metaphor. But if that's true, if it didn't happen in some *real* way, if Jesus isn't *really* with God in the heavenly realm, then we might as well pack our bags and go home, for there is no further point to worshipping him, serving him, or praying to him, cause *he's not really there*. All of this would just be an elaborate *farce*, dreamed up by a bunch of crazy or deluded people two thousand years ago who were compelled to risk imprisonment and even death for boldly proclaiming things that apparently had *no grounding in actual reality*. To which I say, *rubbish*. There is *no way* the New Testament would have been created if these people weren't *utterly convinced* that it was *true*. That he really *had* been raised from the dead, that he really *had* been taken up into heaven, that he really *had* taken a seat on the right hand of Almighty God.

So since it's true: what then? What *difference* does it make for us, here and now, to know that Jesus is sitting – and, apparently, sometimes *standing* – on the right hand of Almighty God?

There are two reasons why it matters. First: *everything in all creation is now under the authority*

of Jesus Christ. Peter says he “is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.” (1 Peter 3:22) Paul says that God “highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, 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.” (Philippians 2:9-11) *Jesus is in charge now. God’s put him in charge. All authority has been given to him. Authority over everything on earth, authority over the entire heavenly realm, authority even over the angels and other spiritual powers. This whole universe is now under Christ’s power and dominion. “King of kings and Lord of lords.” Whether we acknowledge him as such or not, that is what he is, and there ain’t nothin’ you or I can do to change that. You can disobey him if you want; you can dismiss him if you must; but I wouldn’t recommend it. Who’s in charge? It’s not you! Do you want to be standing in opposition to him when he returns? Do you want to be the one who says to him, “I didn’t really think it was true, so I didn’t live my life like it mattered”? There’s an awe and a reverence we need to have, because Christ is King. You have the freedom to choose whether you will live your life in accordance with his will, or whether you will do otherwise and risk the consequences. There’s one Old Testament verse that is quoted in the New Testament more often than any other, and it directly relates to this exaltation of Jesus Christ in the heavenly realm: Psalm 110:1: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” That’s God talking to Jesus, inviting him to take his seat at God’s right hand – “until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” Jesus has enemies – and they’re going to lose. Big time! The fact that Jesus is sitting enthroned in heaven at the right hand of God Almighty means that every single one of us has a choice to make: are we going to acknowledge his authority – or not? Are we going to submit to his will – or not? He’s the boss now – and he’s got ultimate power. I wouldn’t advise making the wrong choice!*

The second reason why Christ sitting on the right hand of God matters: *he’s our intercessor before Almighty God.* When you sin against God, what happens? Do you have to live with that stain forever? “Who is to condemn?” asks Paul in Romans. “It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed *intercedes* for us.” (Romans 8:34) Jesus, says Hebrews, “is able for all time *to save those who approach God through him*, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Hebrews 7:25) Hebrews describes him as a great “high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.” (Hebrews 7:26) When you screw up, when you go down the wrong paths, when you sin against Almighty God; and you confess your sin, *who is it* who restores you to a right relationship with God? *It’s Jesus.* It’s Jesus *because* he’s sitting up there in heaven, on the right hand of God, making intercession for you and for me. He’s *always* sitting up there, ready to hear your confessions, willing to make your scarlet stain become white like snow. Karl Barth said that “the first and last thing that matters for our existence in time” is the fact that Jesus is sitting on the right hand of God. Whatever else may happen in this life, “there is one constant, one thing that remains and continues, this sitting of His at the right hand of God the Father.”

He’s there, *now.* He’s ready for you to submit to his authority, *now.* He’s ready to hear your confession, *now.* He’s ready to intercede for you, to make his sacrificial self-offering effective for *you, right now.* He will always be there – regardless of what *anybody* has to say – right up until the very end.

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