

“Cast All Your Anxiety on Him”

Acts 1:6-14; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

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Easter VII

This past Thursday was Ascension Day, one of the annual festivals in the life of the church, though it often doesn't get much attention. A lot of churches basically skip right over it. I used to skip it myself. It marks the 40th day after Easter, which is always a Thursday. The book of Acts tells us that Jesus appeared to his followers for a period of 40 days after his resurrection, and then he ascended into heaven. Ascension Day commemorates that noteworthy event in the life of Christ.

In the last few years I have paid greater attention to Ascension Day, once I realized just how important this event is in the gospel story. Imagine if things had happened in some other way. Jesus comes down from heaven to earth. He dies; he descends to the dead; we talked about that last week. Then he rises on Easter morn, appearing to the women and the disciples. We have a variety of stories about these resurrection appearances of Jesus, in all four gospels, plus there are a few other references elsewhere in the New Testament. It's very clear that people *saw* him, *experienced* him; that he was there, *present with them*, in some kind of bodily form. Then, after 40 days, he bids the disciples farewell, and ascends to his heavenly throne. But what if he *hadn't*? What if he had stayed here? That might be comforting, in a way – to actually be able to *see* Jesus, *talk* to Jesus, *listen* to Jesus, *eat* with Jesus. On Monday he appears in Singapore ... on Tuesday he shows up in South Africa ... on Wednesday he's in Toronto... on Thursday he's in San Francisco ... on Friday he's here in Mason! We wouldn't be able to *predict* where he would appear next, but to have Jesus constantly appearing *in person, in the flesh* to various people around the globe – that would bring a lot of comfort, wouldn't it?

Although ... if he had stayed here ... then he wouldn't be up in heaven. He wouldn't be sitting on the right hand of God. He wouldn't have been crowned; he wouldn't be worshiped by all the citizens of heaven; the angels wouldn't be bowing down to him; *we wouldn't get to be with him when we die*; he *wouldn't have gone ahead to prepare a place for us*. We probably wouldn't be able to *pray* to him.

So ... maybe that's not such a good idea. Maybe it's a *very good thing* that he didn't stick around down here, that he *did* ascend into heaven; that he *did* go to prepare a place for us; that he *is* ready and waiting to welcome us home, when it's our turn to go. And that he *is* there, to hear our prayers, and receive our praise. It's a good thing – a *very good thing* – that Christ didn't stay *here*, but went *there*.

Once I realized all that, I realized why we need to commemorate Christ's ascension every year. It *matters* that Jesus is *up there*, and not *down here*. It really matters. It's *good* – for *us*!

It's interesting that Jesus seemed to have some doubt in his mind about whether God really

would bring him to that place of glory. He prays about it, in that passage I read from John's gospel. The context for this prayer is the Last Supper; Jesus prays this very long, very complicated prayer, in John's version of the story. I'm going to simplify it for you a great deal. Basically, Jesus asks God for two things: first, for God to glorify him; second, for God to protect his followers. When Jesus asks God to glorify him, what he's asking is for God to lift him up, to give back to him the glory that he had from the very beginning. He's asking God to bring him back up to God again. Not just to resurrect him from the dead, but also to *ascend* him into heaven. That was the plan all along, but Jesus feels a need to ask it, here on the eve of his death! Perhaps it is his humanity revealing itself; perhaps there is some *fear* in his heart. Fully God, *fully human*, maybe that human side of Jesus was *afraid* of what the morrow would bring, *afraid* that God wouldn't see this through all the way to the end. Jesus felt the need to *ask*!

Jesus' second request is that God would protect his flock. There are all sorts of evils and dangers in the world, all sorts of snares people can get caught in. Jesus is on the verge of being caught in one such snare himself. He also knows that the spiritual powers of darkness are very real, and that they like to prey upon our human weaknesses. So Jesus asks God to protect his flock from all that would do them harm. He felt the need to *ask*. Maybe he needed some reassurance, some confidence, that once he was no longer with his disciples, *they would be okay*, that God would still *look out for them*.

God, of course, granted Jesus' first request; God raised him from the dead, lifted him into the heavens, and invited him to take his seat on God's right hand. God *glorified* Jesus. But what about the *second* request? What about Jesus' plea for his flock, for those who follow him, his plea for both you and me? What about his request that God *protect* us? Did God grant *that*? Does God actually *protect* us, here on earth? For the answers to those important questions, let's turn to the reading from 1 Peter.

Now if you've been following along for these Easter-season sermons, you know that Peter wrote this letter to a group of Christians who were suffering some form of discrimination or persecution. Peter calls it a "fiery ordeal." He says that they were being "reviled." He indicates that, to some extent, they were "sharing Christ's sufferings." Times were not easy; *evil* was being done to them. Peter tells them that they shouldn't be surprised at this; there's nothing *strange* about the fact that humans sometimes do great evil to other humans. The fact that Jesus has come and gone hasn't changed that fundamental reality. Their suffering is real, and it's unjust, and it's not just going to magically go away. So Peter gives them some specific pieces of advice, some specific *things they can do* while they are in the midst of that difficult time. What he says to them is applicable to people experiencing *any* form of suffering, both the suffering that is intentionally inflicted on you by other people, as well as other forms of suffering that come to all of us from time to time in the course of our day-to-day living. If you're experiencing any form of suffering right now, any form of pain or injustice, or even if you're just simply *having a hard time right now*, these words are for *you* as well. Peter has four specific pieces of advice:

First: *Rejoice*. Yes, that's right, *rejoice*. Rejoice because Jesus *also* suffered. He had to go through a hard time – a *really* hard time! – but in the end, God gave him *glory*. Our suffering may be minimal compared to what Jesus experienced – but God will give *us* glory too. Your suffering is not going to last forever; it is not going to have the final word in your life. That word belongs to *God*. God is going to *redeem* your suffering. One day, you will suffer no more, and you will have *glory* in its place.

Second: *Humble yourself* under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Remember: *you are not alone*. There is Someone who loves you, *unceasingly*. Someone who is watching out for you, pretty much the same way he watched out for Jesus. *Don't lose sight of that* in

the midst of your suffering. God has not abandoned you, any more than he abandoned Jesus. You may have to go through a rough spot in your life, like Jesus did. It may *feel* like God's not there for you. But don't make the mistake of thinking that God has *forgotten* about you, or that he doesn't *care* about you. Nothing could be further from the truth. Don't spurn God; don't kick God away. *Humble yourself*. His mighty hand is still looking out for you ... even if it may not *feel* like it right now.

Third: *Cast all your anxiety on him*, because he cares for you. Cast *all* your anxiety on him. This is tough. When we're suffering, we cry, we moan, we shout, maybe we complain, maybe we rage. What we need to do is *take it to God*. Lift up our heartfelt prayers to God himself. You know, the way Jesus did, in that prayer. Or like we see in many of the Psalms. People pouring their hearts out to God – their tears, their fears, their worries, their sorrows, *all* of it. Sometimes we just try to manage all on our own; other times we complain to our friends or to anyone who will listen; what Peter is telling us to do is to *cast all our anxiety on God*. Why? *"Because he cares for you."* We're not just God's *creations*; we're *beloved children*. God *cares* about us, about our tears and our fears. God still *listens*. God still *loves*.

Fourth, and finally: *Discipline yourselves; keep alert*. "Like a roaring lion," Peter says, "your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." When we're stressed, when we're suffering, we sometimes turn to things that we *think* might make us feel better, but really don't help us at all. We eat ... too much. We drink ... too much. We open a pack of cigarettes. We turn to drugs, or porn, or unwholesome sex. All the vices that are out there, all the stories we hear about the people who go off the deep end, all the poor choices that we ourselves make – it's all the devil's way of prowling around, looking for someone to devour. When we're stressed, when we're suffering, we're particularly vulnerable. Those are the times we're most likely to say "yes" to something that in other times we might say "no" to. Peter sounds like he may be talking from personal experience. "Discipline yourselves; keep alert." "Resist him, steadfast in your faith." Have it clear in your mind what boundary lines *you do not want to cross*. When you're feeling a temptation to cross the line, *realize what's going on*. Your adversary is prowling around, looking for someone to devour, and he's set his sights on *you*. This isn't just an *urge* you're feeling, it's not just a *longing* for something to make you feel better; *there's something nefarious going on in the spiritual realm*. The devil has set his sights on you, because *you're vulnerable*. Your suffering, your pain, it's putting a target on your back, it's making you more likely to *lose your way*. Discipline yourselves; keep alert; resist him; *stand firm in your faith*. Take a step back; think about what's *really* going on, about *why* you're feeling that temptation right now; remind yourself *what kind of a person you really want to be*; call on *Jesus* to give you the strength to *say no* to the spiritual forces of darkness. Remember, Jesus experienced temptation too. He knows the devil's power; he mustered the strength to say "no." He can help *you* muster the same strength as well.

"After you have suffered for a little while," says Peter, "the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you." Listen to that again. "The God of all grace, *who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ*," will do all these things for you. See, God has called *us* to eternal glory, just the same way that God called *Jesus* to eternal glory. Jesus who suffered *was also glorified*. We who suffer will *also* be glorified. We don't get to sit on God's right hand – but we *do* receive the same call that Jesus received: the call to *God's eternal glory*.

See why Christ's ascension matters? Because *where Jesus is*, there *we* will be too. Just as God brought Jesus out of suffering into glory, God brings *us* out of suffering into glory. *That's* why it matters!

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