

“Seated at His Right Hand in the Heavenly Places”

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

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Today we are commemorating a very important moment in the life of Christ: his ascension into heaven. Technically we should have done this on Thursday, but we weren't here on Thursday, so we are doing it today instead. This is one of the moments in the life of Christ that is not as well known as it should be. When I was talking with the children and youth of the church on Wednesdays this year, we covered *all* the major moments in Christ's life. Most of the kids have a pretty good grasp of Christ's birth, Christ's resurrection, and – perhaps to a lesser extent – Christ's death. Christ's baptism was a bit less well known, but his entry into Jerusalem was somewhat more familiar. Eventually we came around to Christ's ascension into heaven. This was new territory for many of the kids. Many of them seemed to think that Jesus rose from the dead, and that was pretty much the end of the story. Maybe some adults think that too. But it's not the end of the story; really, it's the start of a whole new chapter.

Most of what we know about Christ's ascension come to us from Luke the evangelist. At the end of his gospel, Luke tells us that Jesus led his disciples out to Bethany, lifted up his hands, blessed them, and then, “while he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.” The disciples “worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” Luke re-tells this story in some more detail at the beginning of his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles. There, he tells us that Jesus appeared to the disciples for a period of forty days following his resurrection, during which time he gave them further teachings about the kingdom of heaven, and further instructions about what they were to do. Then, he was “taken up to heaven”: “as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Two angels appear to the disciples, telling them in no uncertain terms that Jesus has been “taken up from you into heaven,” and that one day he will come back to earth, in the same way.

Mark makes a brief mention of Christ's ascension right at the end of his gospel: “So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.” There are also numerous references to Christ's ascension in other parts of the New Testament. In John's gospel, Jesus tells Mary Magdalene, on Easter morning, that he has “not yet ascended to the Father,” and he instructs her to tell the disciples that is what he doing very soon. In Paul's first letter to Timothy, Paul says that Jesus was “taken up in glory.” Peter, in his first epistle, writes that Jesus “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.” Other epistles also refer to the reality that Christ is now sitting at the right hand of Almighty God.

So the consistent picture we get is that God raised Jesus from the dead – that's the very familiar Easter story – and then, 40 days later, which would have been a Thursday, God brought Jesus back into

the heavenly realm, which is, of course, where he had started out, in the first place. Remember what John says at the beginning of his gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” So Jesus started out, with God, in the heavenly realm, before the creation of anything in this universe. He was there from before time began, and remained there until the day he came to earth, taking human form inside the womb of his mother Mary. He was in her womb for about nine months, then after his birth he lived about 33 or 34 years on this earth. The best scholars think he was born around the year 4 BC, and was crucified around the year AD 30. (Yeah, I know, it’s really odd that Jesus was born four years “before Christ;” the short explanation for that is that the sixth-century monk who developed our system of dating years from the birth of Christ made an error in his calculations. Our calendar is off by about four years – and I don’t think there’s anything you or I can do to fix it!) So Jesus lived on earth for about 33 or 34 years, and then he was killed, crucified on two beams of wood – which was a common Roman method of execution. That happened on a Friday afternoon. Scripture tells us that Christ’s spirit then went to the abode of the dead, where all those who had died before him were given an opportunity to hear the gospel message, and be raised with him to new life. Then, only about a day and a half later, Christ rose from dead on a Sunday morning, appearing to the great surprise of many of his disciples. Some of them weren’t sure that he wasn’t just a ghost, especially Thomas, who insisted that he wouldn’t believe until he put his finger in Christ’s wounds. But, sure enough, the risen Christ wasn’t just a spirit; he had a body as well. Over the next 39 days Christ appeared to a variety of disciples in a variety of places. Finally, on the 40th day, Christ left this earth for a second time, this time not going down (so to speak) to the abode of the dead, but rather up (so to speak), to the heavenly realm, from which he had originally come. His ascension into heaven is the culmination of his round-trip journey, which had begun some 33 or 34 years earlier.

It happened here, we are told, on the Mount of Olives, at the village of Bethany. If you recall the Palm Sunday story, Bethany is one of the villages that Jesus traveled through after picking up his donkey, and it’s where he stayed at nights during the time he was teaching in Jerusalem. It’s just a short walk across the Kidron Valley from the heart of Jerusalem. Today there is a shrine near the top of the Mount of Olives, marking the place where Christ’s ascension is believed to have occurred. That shrine is called the Dome of the Ascension. That site has a long history; three different churches have stood on that spot over the centuries, and today it is occupied by an Islamic mosque. Why is there a mosque there? Well, this may surprise you, but it is a traditional Muslim belief that Christ ascended into heaven. Muslims do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God or God incarnate, but they *do* believe that Jesus was a faithful prophet who ascended into heaven. So that spot is sacred to Muslims as well as Christians, and the Muslims in charge of the mosque do allow Christian communities to hold worship celebrations there on Ascension Day. Across the street is a much newer building, the Russian Orthodox Church of the Ascension, which was built in the late 19th century. It has a tall bell tower, which can be seen from Jerusalem, with a spire pointing upward. The message is clear: *he’s up there*. Nearby there is also a German Lutheran Church and a Greek Orthodox Church that both commemorate the ascension. So the Mount of Olives features no less than *four* religious buildings dedicated to Christ’s ascension!

Now this is all very interesting, but does it *matter*? I mean, what *difference* does it make that Christ ascended into heaven? Well – simply put – it makes *all the difference in the world*.

One of the last things that Jesus says in Matthew’s gospel is this: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” *All* authority, in heaven *and* on earth, has been given to Jesus. Who has

given it to him? *God*, of course. When Jesus ascended back into the heavenly realm, he took his seat on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and *God gave him all the power. All of it. God's power to judge. God's power to love. God's power to forgive. God's power to heal. God's power to save.* Every little scrap of power that God has, *Jesus has.* We saw Jesus do all sorts of things with the divine power when he was on earth. Heal the sick. Cure the blind and the lame. Cast out demons. Raise the dead. All of that happened, more than once, on an *individual* basis, case by case, person by person. Now it can happen on a *global* basis. On a *cosmic* scale. *Jesus has the power to do anything and everything.* He could bring an end to all sickness and disease. He could end all wars everywhere. He could eradicate poverty and crime and racism; he could bring an end to every sort of stigma, every form of bullying, every kind of terrorism. He could hold people accountable for all their words and deeds – all the lies, all the greed, all the cruelty, all the violence. He could make it so that schools didn't have to lock their doors and every parent could rest assured knowing that their precious child would come home *safe* at the end of the day. He could truly bring *peace* to this world, a peace like we have never seen.

The question is ... why doesn't he? If he's got all this power, why doesn't he *wield* it?

Well, he *will.* That is abundantly clear from the New Testament. Christ has died, Christ is risen, *Christ will come again.* One day, he *is* going to come back, and he's going to clean house. We get some hints of what that day will look like in various parts of the Bible, from the prophet Amos to the Gospels to the book of Revelation; *consistently* we are told, *it's not going to be pretty.* 'Cause there's a *lot* here that needs to be cleaned up. Jesus is going to come back, kick some you-know-what, and take names.

So why the delay? It's been nearly two thousand years since his ascension. Two thousand years filled with war and hate, murder and brutality, rape and child abuse, coveting and adultery, and every other kind of sin you can think of. Jesus doesn't seem to directly intervene, much of the time. Some people would say, *all* of the time. Why not? Why are we in this long *holding pattern* before his return?

Well ... see ... there's this little thing called *the church.* A community of people committed to the values and principles of Jesus Christ, who have been given a special gift. The Holy Spirit of God. We'll talk more about that next week, at Pentecost. *We* have been appointed as God's agents on earth. God ... and Jesus ... are expecting *us* to do some things. What things? Grow in our own personal holiness, for one; go out and tell people about Jesus, for two; bring *as many people as we can* to the knowledge and the love of God. Those three things – *spiritual development, spreading the word, bringing people to Jesus* – those have the potential to make an *enormous* difference. *If we're serious about them. If we're not just paying them lip service.* I have a feeling Jesus is up there right now, crying his eyes out at all the horror that is going on in the world, but also looking at us, *his church,* saying to himself, "Come on, folks. Why don't you use a little bit more of that *Holy Spirit* we gave you?" You see, when Christ comes, he's not only going to hold all the horrible sinners into account – the people we hear about on the news. He's also going to hold *us* into account, for how good a job *we* did, doing the things *he told us to do.*

Christ ascended into heaven! That is *fantastic news!* But it should also *give us pause.* He's got all the power, *all* the authority. We are the people who say we are dedicated to his cause. How much do our *actions* match our *words*? How intentional are we, *really,* about growing in his ways? How good a job are we doing spreading the gospel far and wide? How much are we *truly* increasing his kingdom?

He's up there. He's watching. He's taking notes. What's he writing down about *us*?

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