

“The Ascension”

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Acts 1:6-14

Mason First Presbyterian Church

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Seventh Sunday of Easter

This past Thursday – three days ago – was a little-known Christian festival. At least, it’s little-known in our Presbyterian world, and in numerous other denominations as well, but in the Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran traditions, it is quite a big deal. It is called *Ascension Day*, or, more fully, *the Ascension of Jesus Christ*. It is an annual commemoration that takes place 40 days after Easter and 10 days before Pentecost, remembering and celebrating the ascension of Christ into heaven.

There are two accounts of Christ’s ascension in the New Testament, both of which were written by the same author. At the very end of the Gospel according to Luke, we read: “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” Luke doesn’t give us many details, just that it took place in “the vicinity of Bethany,” which was a village on the far side of the Mount of Olives, less than two miles from Jerusalem. I’ve talked about Bethany before; that’s the village where Mary and Martha lived; that’s where Jesus raised their brother Lazarus from the dead; that’s where Jesus began his triumphal procession into Jerusalem (which we commemorate on Palm Sunday); that’s where Jesus lodged during the days that followed; and that’s where Jesus was anointed with some extremely costly perfume, not long before his death. Jesus had friends in Bethany; it was a place of comfort and safety for him; towards the end, it essentially functioned as his temporary home. So it makes sense that Jesus might have chosen that this event would happen there. Luke does not specify precisely who was with Jesus when this event occurred; he just mentions, in an earlier verse, “the eleven and their companions.” Nor does Luke specify when this event occurred. Indeed, if all we had was Luke’s Gospel, we might think it occurred in the evening on the day of his resurrection, because in that book Luke does not give any indication that any significant amount of time has passed since the resurrection.

But Luke wrote a second volume, a sequel to his Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles. Luke begins his second book where he ended his first: with the ascension of Jesus. But now, he elaborates further; he gives us some more details. Jesus was “appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” Jesus did not ascend into heaven right away after his resurrection; no, he stuck around, so to speak, for nearly *six weeks*, and he continued to teach people throughout that period of time. “While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’” Jesus does not want them to

disperse after he departs, which he is just about to do; he does not want them returning to their homes, in Galilee or elsewhere. No, they need to stay together for what will end up being ten more days, until the festival of Pentecost, when the *next* significant event will happen. We'll talk about *that* next week!

The disciples who are with Jesus when he gives this instruction sense that something significant is about to happen. "They asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'" The fact that they asked him that question is *really* interesting – they *still* think that Jesus, as the long-expected Messiah, is going to become a military and political figure, kicking the Roman Empire out of Palestine, and re-establishing the Jewish monarchy, which had been extinguished centuries earlier. But no; that is not how Jesus is going to reign. He will indeed become King – King of kings and Lord of lords! – but he will never be an *earthly* king. He does not explain that to them clearly. Instead, he says this: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." In other words, *stop guessing about when God is going to do things*. That's not information that God is going to reveal to you. Jesus continues: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." That verse – Acts 1:8 – serves as a compass for the entire rest of the book. Luke will describe the coming of the Holy Spirit in chapter 2, and then he will spend the next 26 chapters describing how the apostles will teach about Jesus, first in Jerusalem, then in the surrounding region of Judea and the nearby region of Samaria, and then finally they will take their message about Jesus far and wide, by land and by sea, ultimately reaching the very heart of the Roman Empire, the magnificent city of Rome.

Then comes the moment we've been waiting for: "When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." The ascension. Luke describes it a little differently this time. He adds the detail about the cloud, and then he relates what happened next: "While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them." Two messengers from God; two angels, who speak to the disciples: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Evidently, the disciples were so awestruck by what had just happened that they just kept looking up at the cloud. Who can blame them? I'd be staring at that cloud too! The angels say: "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Jesus is gone. He is no longer in this earthly realm; he is now in the heavenly realm. But he's not going to stay there forever. One day, *some* day, he is going to return.

The disciples do what Jesus had told them to do. "They returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying." That was probably the very same "upper room" where they had shared the Last Supper with Jesus on the night before his death. Those present were "Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James" – eleven of the original twelve disciples, everyone except the betrayer, Judas Iscariot. "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women" – those would be women like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, who had all gone to the tomb on the morning of Christ's resurrection – "including Mary the mother of Jesus" – who had watched her son die – "as well as his brothers." Those would be the biological children of Mary and Joseph; they are mentioned a few times in the Gospels, but they evidently did not become believers until after Christ's resurrection. Now they believe; now they are part of that relatively small group of people who became the founding members of the worldwide Church.

Those are the only two narratives of Christ's ascension. But there are a few other references to the ascension in other parts of the New Testament. The next-to-last verse in the Gospel of Mark says that he "was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God." (Mark 16:19) In John's Gospel, Jesus himself refers to his ascension three times: "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (John 3:13); "Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?" (John 6:62); and "Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (John 20:17). The ascension of Christ is also mentioned or alluded to in six of the letters in the New Testament: "It is Christ who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us" (Romans 8:34); "God put this power to work 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 age to come" (Ephesians 1:20-21); "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1); "God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name" (Philippians 2:9); "He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory" (1 Timothy 3:16); and "Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him" (1 Peter 3:21-22). The affirmation that Christ ascended into heaven became a central tenet of Christianity, and was enshrined in our oldest creeds: "he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father," in the Nicene Creed, and "he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty," in the Apostles' Creed. So we commemorate this ascension of Jesus every year on the fortieth day after Easter, ten days before Pentecost, always on a Thursday – except, unfortunately, the reality is that for most Christians, this commemoration has fallen off our radar screen. We need to put it back.

But why? Why does the ascension of Jesus matter? What difference does it make that Jesus spent forty days on earth after his resurrection and then left earth to go be with God? Wouldn't it have been better if he had stuck around? If he had continued to teach and preach, continued to save and heal, continued to welcome outcasts and strangers, continued to share and spread the love of God? Perhaps. I look around and I think, *Gosh, we sure could use Jesus*. This world is a frightful *mess*!

But Jesus is *there*, not here. He is, as we are told repeatedly, sitting at the right hand of God. We do have the *presence* of Jesus here with us, in the form of the Holy Spirit. I talked about that last week – the *Paraclete* (that's the Greek word that appears in the Gospel of John), which is, to borrow Raymond Brown's words again, "the personal presence of Jesus in the Christian while Jesus is with the Father;" "the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent." So Jesus's *presence* is *here*, but Jesus *himself* is *there*. Sitting at the right hand of God – for nearly two thousand years now! *What is he doing while he sits?*

Well, to answer that question fully, I would need to give another sermon. But I can briefly give you four key points that are lifted up in scripture: (1) he *strengthens* and *protects* us (Philippians 4:13; Ephesians 3:16; 2 Thessalonians 3:3); (2) he *prays* and *advocates* for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1); (3) he *reigns* over us and over all things (Luke 1:33; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:21-22; Revelation 11:15; Revelation 19:16); and (4) he gives us *hope* (Colossians 1:27; 1 Timothy 1:1; Titus 2:13; 1 Peter 1:3). In short, Jesus is not just sitting there *idle*. He is actively *doing things for us*. He is, right now, giving us benefits that we can't *see* – but that maybe we can *feel*. I know that for me, just knowing that

he is *there* constantly reminds me that the miseries of this world are not the end of the story. No matter how bad things might *ever* get here on this earth, our story is ultimately going to have a *happy* ending – because Jesus is *there*, reigning over it all. He loves, he cares, and – one day – he is going to come back.

In the meantime, though, we do have his presence with us, in the form of the Holy Spirit. This presence *comforts* us, *nurtures* us, *guides* us, *teaches* us, *challenges* us, *inspires* us, *motivates* us. In a way, it's as if Jesus is in two places at once. He is *there*, acting, one might say, on a *cosmic* scale. And his presence is *here*, abiding with us, working within us, on a very *individual* basis. We are not alone on this earth; his presence is here with us always. *And*, at the same time, he is watching over us and protecting us and looking after our best interests from his seat in the heavenly realm. Jesus is able to be both *here* and *there* because of the ascension. Because of the ascension, we get the best of both worlds.

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