

“ASCENDED AND PRESENT.”

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Text for the Sermon: Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11

Introduction.

It seems like a long time ago already, but six weeks ago we celebrated Resurrection Sunday. Forty days after Easter, which would have been this past Thursday, Jesus ascended into heaven. Ten days after the Ascension or fifty days after Easter the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost. In some church traditions today is called Ascension Sunday. The ascension doesn't get the attention that Christmas and Easter get, or even Pentecost.

Just about everyone, even non-Christians, knows about the meaning and significance of Christmas, they know about Jesus' life on earth, His great miracles and wisdom, about His teaching and parables, they know about His crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection.

But ask someone, even a Christian about the ascension, how it happened, why it happened, why it matters and you are likely to get some shoulder shrugs.

The life of Jesus could be thought of as four rungs on a ladder, birth, death, resurrection and ascension. The birth rung begins on earth and the ascension rung ends in heaven. If our ladder only has the first three rungs we will come up short of the goal and short of understanding all that we should understand about Jesus. In fact if it wasn't for His ascension, all that He did before it would be of little significance or power.

Think of some great explorer who leaves his own country and goes out to discover some faraway land and makes all kinds of fantastic discoveries. It's of no value if he doesn't return and tell someone else about it. The Father sent His Son on a great mission and that mission would not be complete until He returned home.

It's an interesting irony that we devote most of our thinking about Jesus to His 33 years spent on earth, and very little of our thinking to what Jesus has been doing for the past 1985 years or so.

It's important that we know about this event, why it happened and what it means for us as today.

First, the facts (how did it happen).

Let's get our facts straight. The ascension was an eye witness event seen by the eleven disciples. Mark mentions it in his Gospel, Luke gives us the most detail both in his Gospel and in his history called Acts. Peter and Paul speak of it in their letters.

Jesus purposefully spent 40 days proving His resurrection is real, that He was really alive, and that He had a living, physical human body. He ate and drank with the disciples, He walked around with them and talked to them. He showed them the nail scars in his hands and feet. He gave many clear and visible proofs of his resurrection and of his true humanity.

At the Ascension Jesus wanted to make it clear that this was His final appearance and that He was now leaving the earth to return to heaven.

He lifted His hands in a *parting blessing*, a priestly benediction indicating this was a final act. He was then taken up.

Jesus didn't slowly dwindle into the distance, like watching a balloon float away for as long as you can. Jesus ascended and was surrounded not by clouds, but by *a cloud*. This isn't an ordinary cloud, this is a reference to the Shekinah glory of God, like the cloud that rested above the tabernacle signifying the presence of the God of glory.

Jesus didn't just go up into the sky, He entered into heaven, into that glorious, transcendent, supernatural, spiritual presence of God. Jesus ascended to a real place. Heaven is a physical reality and a physical locality. Jesus is in heaven.

Not only is Jesus risen and not in the tomb anymore, but He is ascended and He is not physically present here on earth anymore. I hate to be the one to burst someone's bubble but Jesus doesn't make footprints in the sand anymore so don't take the poem literally.

The point of the ascension was to make certain for the disciples they weren't going to run into Jesus any more on earth. He wouldn't pop in on them in some unexpected moment. In fact, the next time He would physically return to earth it would be the way He left, on another glory cloud and visible to all.

Is this the end of the story? Jesus went up in the clouds to heaven. The End.

Jesus didn't go back to heaven to finally get some rest after 33 grueling years on earth. He wasn't glad to finally get some peace and quiet, or get away from us and our sinful world. His words "It is finished" on the cross didn't mean He was done and in retirement now.

Second, the reasons (why it happened).

The ascension of Jesus is the necessary complement and completion of His resurrection and His life and ministry on earth. The ascension shows that the work the Father sent the Son to do was accomplished.

Hebrews 1:3 After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

When Jesus ascended into heaven He received glory and honor and authority. His return was with even greater glory and honor and splendor than before because of what He had done.

We know from one of Jesus' parables that there is great joy in heaven when one sinner repents. Can anyone even conceive of the joy when Jesus returned, the one who makes all salvation possible and who saves all who enter heaven? Can any mind imagine the glorious reception held for Christ returning with His human nature?

Here was the Lord of Glory, now with human flesh, reconciling heaven and earth, uniting things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:10). If the father in the parable received the prodigal son with open arms and lavish love, what was the heavenly Father's welcome like?

He exalted Him to His right hand (Acts 2:33), saying, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool" (Psalm 110:1).

Philippians 2:9-11 God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This was Jesus' coronation as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Heaven was a new and different place and if it's possible to say this, a more glorious place of even greater joy when Jesus returned. This was not business as usual or everything back to normal. The angels sang a new song never sung before:

Revelation 5:12 "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

At the right hand of the Father Jesus has received authority over all the universe. God

Ephesians 1:20-21 raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named.

I Peter 3:22 [Jesus] has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

The work of Christ is vindicated by the Father and His victory is confirmed.

Jesus had to separate Himself from the limitations of earth to continue His work from heaven as our prophet, priest and king. And it is the incredible things that Christ is doing in heaven that leads us to consider the blessings and benefits that are ours because of His ascension.

Third, the benefits (why it matters, what difference does it make).

Why were they joyful? Their best and most intimate friend, their Lord and Savior had just departed? Why were they filled with great joy? There was expectation of great benefits to come.

Jesus departed giving a blessing. Everything Jesus does is a blessing and a benefit to those who know Him and love Him and follow Him. And that continues to be true. Jesus came to earth to be a blessing and He left the earth to continue to be a blessing. Jesus is the author of all blessings. Through Him we have received every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3ff).

The Heidelberg Catechism gives three benefits for us of the ascension.

Q.49. HOW DOES CHRIST'S ASCENSION TO HEAVEN BENEFIT US?

A. First, he pleads our cause in heaven the presence of his Father. Second, we have our own flesh in heaven - a guarantee that Christ our head will take us, his members, to himself in heaven. Third, he sends us his Spirit to us on earth as a further guarantee. By the Spirit's power we make the goal of our lives, not earthly things, but the things above where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand.

First, because we have an advocate in heaven before the Father, we have a defense attorney, we have a prayer partner, we have a Great High Priest.

He is not idle, He is not in retirement. He hasn't slept a wink since He got there, He never slumbers or sleeps. He ever lives to make intercession for all the saints (Hebrews 7:25).

When we talk about the perseverance of the saints or the preservation of the saints, the reason for that truth is because we have a permanent advocate before the Father who constantly and continually intercedes for us.

As a High Priest He presents to the Father on our behalf the merits of His own sacrifice and obedience and righteousness. And on that basis, the basis of what He has done, the Father extends to us His grace and mercy.

I John 2:1-2 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Second, we have our very own flesh and blood in heaven, a human being is now in the presence of God. The scandal of Christianity is not just that God came to earth to take on our flesh, but

He took our flesh back with Him to heaven. As John ('Rabbi') Duncan, the Scottish theologian and missionary, said, "The dust of the earth sits on the throne of heaven."

This guarantees the resurrection of our bodies is just as possible as His. We won't be floating around as disembodied souls, we will have real, resurrected bodies in heaven, just as Jesus does. Jesus' home-going makes possible our homecoming in heaven.

Jesus is the forerunner who has gone into heaven taking our flesh with Him. He has gone to prepare a place for us, to make heaven ready to receive our resurrected bodies. As He is glorified and has taken possession of His glory, so He holds it as an inheritance for us.

Philippians 3:20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, **21** who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Let this be a great comfort to you that you have a Savior who has entered into glory as your advocate. He has taken possession of glory in your name and is praying you will be with Him, and has promised to come and take you to be with Him. If He is for us, what do we have to fear?

Third, Jesus' physical, bodily departure makes it possible for the Holy Spirit to come and be with us all, and dwell in each of us.

John 16:7 I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.

It may sound a bit ironic, but because Jesus separated Himself from us and returned to heaven, He is able to be *more present* and more intimate with us than before. While on earth He could only be in one place at one time, such was the limitation of His earthly body. But once back in heaven He can now be with us by His divine presence through His Holy Spirit. As He promised,

"... I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Fourth, Jesus will return in the same manner in which He ascended.

The Ascension is sort of like those movie trailers Hollywood puts out in advance of a movie's release. The Ascension is the trailer for a coming attraction.

Jesus will come in all His glory and receive us to Himself, and restore all things to perfect harmony and sinless perfection. This same Jesus who was on earth and is now in heaven will soon come again. We will either go to Him or He will come to us. Are we ready? Do we desire this?

Finally, for the first time the disciples really begin to get it. The meaning of Christ's humiliation and defeat, the meaning of His agony and death, the meaning of His submission and suffering. Now they saw, now they understood, now their doubts and fears could give way to joy.

Notice they are worshipping and praising Jesus more than when Jesus was with them. Their worship is fuller because now they more fully know Jesus, He isn't just teacher or rabbi or prophet, or even Messiah. Now He's the King of Glory, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

When Jesus is not clearly known, not clearly understood, not confidently trusted and believed, there will be little joy. The more the truth of the Word of God dwells in us richly and deeply the more we will rest in peace and joy.

The chief benefit of Jesus entering heaven is great joy. The king of glory has entered in. The chief benefit of Jesus entering our hearts and lives is joy, He who is in us is greater than He who is in the world.

Conclusion:

The ascension means that the Father has glorified the Son and given Him the highest place and exalted Him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. This universe has a ruler, a Lord and King, enthroned over it all.

This should leak out of us in our responses and reactions to everything that happens in our lives and around us and in our world. He is directing the course of all events, He is causing all things to work for our good, He is providing and protecting, blessing and benefiting.

John Calvin sums up this great truth with this application of its benefit to us:

“We look to our Head Who is already in heaven, and say, ‘Although I am weak, there is Jesus Christ Who is powerful enough to make me stand upright. Although I am feeble, there is Jesus Christ who is my strength. Although I am full of miseries, Jesus Christ is in immortal glory and what He has will some time be given to me and I shall partake of all His benefits. Yes, the devil is called the prince of this world. But what of it? Jesus Christ holds him in check; for He is King of heaven and earth. There are devils above us in the air who make war against us. But what of it? Jesus Christ rules above, having entire control of the battle. Thus, we need not doubt that He gives us the victory. I am here subject to many changes, which may cause me to lose courage. But what of it? The Son of God is my Head, Who is exempt from all change. I must, then, take confidence in Him. This is how we must look at His Ascension, applying the benefit to ourselves’” (fourth sermon on the ascension).