

Palm Sunday: Philippians 2:5–11

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Preached on Ascension Day

Two questions for this Thursday evening forty days after Easter: So what? Now what? “So what?” might be more in the lips of those who do not believe, or those who don’t see the point for making such a fuss for a holy day that always falls on a Thursday. Couldn’t the Lord have waited until Sunday?

Now what? is more on the minds of the baptized who live in the last days waiting anxiously to see the glory of Jesus face to face.

So what? is not the kind of question people who shlep off to church on a gray Thursday evening ask themselves. You know why you came, or at least you have some vague notion. Believers don’t need an excuse to worship. “I was glad when they said, ‘Let’s go to the house of the Lord.’” Still, I’m not sure we’re always quite so clear about what exactly why we do what we do when we do it.

Good Friday is clear enough: Jesus’ sacrificial, atoning death on the cross for the life of the world. Though some mistake it for defeat, we still proclaim the victory. Easter Sunday is clearer still: Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, the open, empty tomb. He is risen, Alleluia. But Ascension Day? That’s the odd one. So odd, it isn’t even remotely on the culture’s radar screen. No Ascension Day parades, no Ascension Day sales at the mall. I haven’t heard a word this past week about four more shopping days left until Ascension Day); no Ascension Day family parties. Thursday just isn’t conducive. (Sorry, we can’t make it to church, we’re going to Grandma’s for Ascension Day. Let’s face it – in comparison to Christmas and Easter, Ascension seems not to be much of a big deal. Even our circuit used to give Ascension Day to the “smaller” congregations, figuring the small crowd would look bigger in a small place.

But the Ascension of Jesus is a big deal. A very big deal. If Christ be not ascended, then we’ve got a big problem. Where in the world is He? So let’s get down to the “so what” of Ascension Day.

First, Christ's ascension is the culmination of His work, the big tickertape parade down the streets of the city in which the conquering Christ strides across the crystalline glassy sea in the heavenly throneroom and takes His rightful seat at the right hand of the Father as the hosts of heaven sing out: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."

Moses never made it into the promised land. He was buried in the land of Moab, with a single cameo appearance on Jesus' Mt. of Transfiguration just to assure us that all is well with him. But the One greater than Moses, Jesus our Joshua having gone through the parted Sea of Death in His exodus from death to life, now enters the promised land as the conquering King. Now you see why it has to be a Thursday. Forty days after His resurrection, in parallel to Israel's 40 years in the wilderness after the Red Sea, forty days after His exodus from the Egypt of death, the Promised One greater than Moses leads the charge to heavenly Caanan in a bright cloud.

The bright cloud shows this too. This is no ordinary puff of frozen atmospheric moisture. This is the bright cloud that descended on the Mt. of Transfiguration where Jesus gave a glimpse of His glory. This is the cloud that led Israel through the wilderness. This is the cloud of the glory of YHWH, the shekinah that settled between the cherubim over the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle. The manifestation of God's abiding, though hidden, presence.

The Ascension proclaims the reign of Jesus Christ over all things. His alone is the Name that is above every name. Greater than the name of prophet, priest, or religious leader, greater even than the OT covenant name YHWH, so great is the name of incarnational Name of the Son of God that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow – in heaven, on earth, and under the earth – and every tongue confess the three word creed: Lord Jesus Christ to the glory of God the Father.

We forget the reign of Christ, or better, we willfully disregard it. Our old Adam will not abide it – to be subject to such a King who dies to save His subjects by sheer grace. We recognize only the reign of power and the sword. Even Jesus' handpicked disciples didn't get it. As He was about to extend His hands in a final blessing, they asked Him, "Are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Does the revolution start now? Can we break out the swords and summon the troops? They still didn't recognize that the fight was over, the battle won. Christ had triumphed; the King was returning to His city, to His throne, to sit and reign.

Here was Jesus as they known Him for three years. They saw Him, they touched Him, He ate with them. Even risen from the dead, it's so terribly easy to forget that this man from Nazareth is the Son of the Most High God. He is God in the Flesh. The throne He ascends to occupy is the very same throne He has had for all eternity as the only-begotten Son of God, the throne He vacated, emptying Himself of His divine honor and glory to become Man; humbling Himself in obedience to His own Law to save a world of lawbreakers.

The present reign of Jesus Christ is often neglected or even denied within the gates of Christendom, by those who seek some future reign and some future kingdom. as though Christ were not seated at the right hand of Majesty. The kingdoms of this world are now the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. And we don't by our prayers and pieties put Jesus on His throne. Nor do we by our religious feelings and tears make Him Lord. He is Lord – King of kings and Lord of lords. This day proclaims His lordship over those who believe and over those who refuse to believe. This is not a matter of faith but a matter of fact. Our faith no more seats Christ on the throne than our unbelief unseats Him.

The ascension of Christ is the glorification of our humanity. This is not man become God, but God become Man to rescue fallen humanity bring it back to God. The apostle Paul, writing to the Colossians, views Christ's ascension as our own: "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." In Him you were crucified, in Him you were raised, in Him you are already glorified. And so seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on heavenly things, where your life is, and not on earthly things.

We need to put to rest this gnostic notion that Jesus somehow shed His humanity in His ascension, that He is once again free of the confines of the body. That may sit well with the new agers and all the so-called "spiritualities" of our day, but there is no comfort in a Christ without a body enthroned in heaven. Just as we can say that Mary is the "bearer of God" because she bore the Son of God in her womb, so we can say that a human being reigns over all things from the throne of God. Jesus is our High Priest, like us in every way yet without sin, sympathetic to our humanity, bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh, showing the wounds of His once for all atoning sacrifice in the heavenly temple, pleading our forgiveness and pardon.

There's no comfort in a disembodied God, just as there is no comfort in an absent Jesus. And while we're at it, let's shoot down a second misunderstanding of the ascension, namely that Jesus "went" to another place, the way we say when Grandma dies, "She went to a better place."

Jesus disappeared into the cloud of God's presence; He didn't shoot off into space like a missile. He's withdrawn His visible presence, not His presence. He departs in one way so that He can be with us in a yet greater way.

He's not gone to another place, but He has embraced this place – this mixed up world of war and terror and corrupt boardrooms and adulterous bedrooms. He "fills all in all." Had Jesus not ascended, we would be stuck in those forty days before Thursday, with Jesus popping in here and there. If He's here and He can't be there, and if He's there He can't be here. And how is He then going to "be with us always," as He promised?

The gift of the Ascension is Jesus' abiding presence in the Word, the water of Baptism, in the Bread that is His Body, the wine that is His Blood. He has gone away in one sense to be with us in a greater sense.

The culmination of Jesus' work, His present reign, the glorification of our humanity, His greater and nearer presence – these are the "so what" of the Ascension.

No what?

Three things.

First, know the times. These are the last of the last days. The ascension of Christ marks the beginning of the end, the eschaton, the sabbath's rest of the cosmos prior to the Last Day. The work of salvation is done. "It is finished." And when you're done with your work, you sit down. There is nothing more that needs to be done that what has been done: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ now reigns.

We are in the midst of the "millenium," the "thousand year" reign of the saints with Christ. "But it's been nearly two thousand years," you say. "When did the thousand years begin." And I say, "They began when Jesus ascended to reign from the right hand." And you may as well put away your calculators and calendars because they won't help you. It is not given us to know the times or the seasons. If a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day with the Lord, then this is His cosmic sabbath, His rest, having completed the work of our salvation. And His appearing at the end of the days will be like a thief in the night, unannounced and unanticipated. Go about your lives in freedom and keep watch with joy.

Second, listen. Don't look, listen. Now is not the time of seeing but hearing, and hearing believing. Faith comes by hearing, not by seeing. So stick your eyes in your ears and listen to

what the Lord has to say. You cannot see Him, but you can hear Him in His Word preached to you. You cannot see Him, but He can be recognized in the Breaking of the Bread that is His Body. You cannot see Him, but He is with you always, to the end of the ages. What you now must believe, you will see one Day. But now you must trust in what is not seen. That is the essence of faith.

Third, testify. Having heard, we speak. Jesus didn't leave His disciples staring into space. Nor did the angels who attended Jesus' ascension. Why are you staring into space? The same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven. Lo, He comes with clouds descending, at a day and a time you do not and cannot know.

But in the meantime, for as many days as we have, "you will be my witnesses." In Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of earth. Discipling all the nations – baptizing in the Name and teaching. Proclaiming repentance and forgiveness (or as I prefer to translate it: repentance unto forgiveness – forgiveness is something you turn to that is already there, not something you earn by your repenting). Proclaiming repentance unto forgiveness in the Name of Jesus to all the nations.

It couldn't be clearer than that, could it? We don't need a mission statement or some whiz bang synodical program. The church has it straight from her Head. Speak the good news of Jesus to the world for whom Jesus died.

And do it with all the joy and confidence that comes with being under the gracious reign of Jesus.

Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ now reigns in glory – all of it to save you.

In the Name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Philippians 2:5-11 (Ascension Day)", posted 2003-06-01 (<https://htlcms.org/2003/06/philippians-25-11-ascension-day/>).