



Jesus is Lord

Acts 1:1-11

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May 17 – Ascension (Observed)

What is the significance of the Ascension of Jesus? What does it mean? Why is it important? Is it important? Because of the March for Life this year we had to transfer our celebration to Sunday and as a result everyone's here, but we usually celebrate Ascension on a Thursday and there's only a small handful of us present. That's typical in many churches. In fact, most non-liturgical churches don't celebrate the Ascension at all. I mentioned the Ascension to a pastor friend and he responded by asking, "What's the Ascension?" It's not that he didn't know that Jesus ascended to heaven at the end of his earthly ministry; he was just completely unaware that most Christians down through history have celebrated it as a major feast day.

The Ascension of Jesus must be important. We affirm it in both the Creeds. It's in the Apostle's Creed, which we pray daily. Being a part of the Apostles' Creed also makes it one of the articles of faith that we affirm at our Baptism. And it's in the Nicene Creed too, which we just recited this morning and which we recite every Sunday as a statement and an affirmation of the basic *essentials* of our faith. Jesus' Ascension is right there with his death and resurrection:

"For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father."

As Good Friday leads us inevitably to Easter, Easter inevitably leads us to

the Ascension. Next week is Pentecost and as we see in the lessons, Pentecost can't happen without the Ascension. In the lessons for the Sunday after Ascension—lessons we dropped this morning because we weren't able to celebrate the Ascension this past Thursday—in those lessons Jesus tells his disciples that he must go to his Father so that he can send the Paraclete, the Helper, the Holy Spirit to be with his people. The Ascension is as big a deal as Good Friday and Easter and Pentecost. And yet, while churches typically expect much bigger crowds than usual at Christmas and Easter, we're glad if we can gather a small handful for the Ascension.

I think the problem is something I touched on last week as I preached on Luke 17. The Ascension isn't a big deal to a lot of Christians—especially to a lot of modern North American Christians—because our theology of the kingdom of God and our eschatology (that's the fancy word that theologians use for our doctrine of "last things") have gone so off the rails that there's no longer any room for the Ascension. It just doesn't fit into our popular theology anymore. Popular books and TV preachers have Christians convinced that the kingdom is some future event. They make millions of dollars sensationalising "Bible prophecy" as they read with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other to tell their followers that today's events are heralding the soon coming of the kingdom. Worse, the popular idea is that kingdom comes as Jesus returns and whisks us all away to heaven for a thousand years. And if that's how we understand the kingdom—if it's something that's other-worldly and hasn't yet come—then Jesus' Ascension is nothing more than an affirmation that Jesus left earth to go to heaven. But that's not what the Ascension is about.

Let's start with the Ascension itself. St. Luke describes it in our lesson from Acts that we just read. Jesus led the disciples out of Jerusalem to the

Mount of Olives. He promised them that John's prophecy would soon be fulfilled. He was going to send his Spirit to baptise them with fire. They didn't know what that meant. In fact, it didn't even seem very important to them at the time. They wanted to know about the kingdom! That's what the Messiah was about—he was supposed to come and restore the kingdom of Israel. When he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday they were thinking that maybe now he would finally throw off the poor itinerant rabbi disguise and restore the kingdom, throwing out the Romans and taking up David's throne. But instead Jesus allowed himself to be arrested, beaten, and killed. They were despondent. But then on Sunday he rose from the dead. Maybe *this* was finally it. But through the next forty days Jesus simply taught them the Scriptures. The disciples were excited to have Jesus back with them. They were excited about his resurrection, although I don't think they truly understood what it meant at this point. And so there on the Mount of Olives they asked again: Jesus, it's great you're alive again. We appreciate all the Bible teaching. But when are you going to bring the kingdom? And in response Jesus once again promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower their witness and then told them that it wasn't their place to know the times and seasons fixed by the Father. But then Jesus did something amazing: he ascended into the clouds. There were the disciples staring into the sky, probably with their mouths agape, as Jesus disappeared from their sight. And they just stood there, staring and staring until the two men, the two angels, broke into their wonder and amazement saying, "Hey, you men of Galilee! Are you going to stand there forever staring into space? Jesus went up to heaven and he's coming back. Didn't he give you something important to do in the meantime?"

Why were the disciples standing there agape? You and I would too if we saw our friend ascend into the clouds.

That's not something that people do. But for the disciples it was more significant than we might think. It's tied to Jesus' last words and it's tied to the symbolism of imperial Rome. Julius Caesar took on the trappings of divinity when he became emperor of Rome. After his death the senate declared him divine. The later emperors of Rome followed suit. On their deaths the Senate declared that they had ascended to heaven as gods and they were depicted in imperial imagery ascending into the clouds.

And that was the imagery that surrounded Jesus at his ascension. He didn't *have* to ascend into the clouds that way. Heaven isn't up there somewhere above the clouds. You can't get there by travelling up—even even with a spaceship. Even the Romans understood that heaven was simply the realm of the gods in contrast to the earth, which is the realm of human beings. And so Jesus didn't have to fly up into the clouds to leave the realm of human beings for the realm of God. He simply could have vanished from the disciples' sight. But instead he chose to leave by borrowing the imagery of imperial Rome. Everyone knew that Caesar didn't actually fly up to heaven. The comet commemorating his divinity on Roman coins was just a symbol. But Jesus did it for real. Why? Because it sent the message that Jesus is Lord. "Caesar is Lord" was the creed of imperial Rome. But Caesar was just a pretender. He brought peace to the world, but it was temporary peace forged by violence and intimidation. Jesus, on the other hand, really is Lord. In contrast to Caesar who conquered his enemies with the sword, Jesus conquered his enemies—sin and death—by humbling himself and dying on a cross. And in return, God exalted Jesus and seated him at his right hand—in the place of heavenly honour. Caesar pretends at being Lord, but Jesus really is. That's the first take-away from the Ascension story as St. Luke tells it.

But the other take-away is the one that upsets the popular theology of today, and that's that the kingdom is here and the kingdom is now. It's not coming in the future. It's not coming after a rapture of believers. It's not coming before or after or in the middle of a Great Tribulation. And it's not something we have to go to heaven to experience. The disciples asked Jesus when the kingdom was coming and Jesus responded by telling them that it was not for them to know. I think he was smiling as he said that, because the next thing we see is Jesus ascending. Just as the Ascension sends the message loudly and clearly that Jesus is Lord, it also sends the message loudly and clearly that his kingdom is here and now. They asked him when the kingdom was coming and in response he gave them a dramatic visual that they'd never forget: They saw the King ascend to his throne. Brothers and sisters, the Ascension of Jesus tells us very dramatically and unmistakably that the kingdom is here and now. Why is the Ascension important? Again, it tells us dramatically and unmistakably that the kingdom is here and now.

All of this is important, but what does it mean that Jesus is reigning and that the kingdom is here and now? For that we need to look at the big picture. In the beginning God created the Cosmos to give him glory. At the centre of it was a garden and in that garden the Lord placed human beings to tend and to keep it. Everything about the garden points to its being the Lord's temple. When the Israelites built the tabernacle, the design was meant to mimic the garden. It was in the garden that human beings lived in the presence of the Lord. And later it was in the temple that the Lord manifested his presence in the holy of holies. The temple was the place where heaven and earth met and where the people went to meet with, to worship, and to fellowship with the Lord. The temple pointed back to the

garden. When humanity sinned, the garden was lost. Adam and Eve were cast out and an angel placed at the entrance to guard it. And from there the story of humanity goes from bad to worse. And yet the Lord never abandoned his Creation. The creation was meant to give God glory and when it turned on him, instead of destroying it, God chose to manifest his glory by renewing it—by making a *new creation*. And as humanity lost all knowledge of the Lord, he called Abraham to himself and through Abraham created a *new* humanity in the family of Abraham. Through Abraham, the Lord began the work of restoring the garden.

And yet think about a garden. You can't plant a garden in the wilderness and expect it to flourish on its own. Enemies and wild animals will raid the garden and steal the fruit. Without cultivation and protection the wild will quickly overcome the garden. And so the Lord provided for the protection of his new garden. He sent Jacob and his family to Egypt, where the king looked on them with favour, provided for them, cared for them, and protected them. When the king of Egypt became hostile, the Lord himself rescued his new creation—Israel—and led her into the wilderness and to the promised land. He fed her in the wilderness and he drove out her enemies from the land. Eventually the Lord gave her a human king to protect his new creation from the wilderness—from the hostile enemies—that surrounded her. But through it all, it was ultimately the Lord who was King and who protected his people. Isaiah declared that "the Lord reigns" when Israel was faced with conquest by the Babylonian empire. The Babylonian king and the Babylonian gods had no power over Israel no matter how bad things got. In Daniel's vision ferocious beasts represent the kingdoms of the earth that had conquered and dominated Israel, but in that vision the Lord takes the kingdom away from those

monsters and delivers it to the saints and ultimately to the Son of Man—to Jesus. Even when the Lord uses earthly kings to discipline his people, he continues to care for them. That’s the purpose of his kingship and his kingdom: the care and cultivation of his new creation.

And all this comes to full fruit in Jesus. He has come as the Son of Man. He has come as the Messiah—the true and eternal king in the line of David. He has come to bring the Lord’s new creation to full fruit—to suffer for his people and to give them his Holy Spirit that they might truly be the new creation that Israel was supposed to be—that they might be the true sons and daughters of Abraham. But not only that, he has also come to establish a kingdom over which he will rule himself—a kingdom to protect and to safeguard the new creation—the Lord’s garden as it grows and flourishes and spreads throughout the world. This is the story of the book of Acts. We read the beginning this morning: Jesus ascended into the clouds to take his heavenly throne. Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not. The rest of Acts is the story of the church, of the new creation, of the kingdom spreading throughout the world. And Acts ends dramatically with Paul in Rome, in chains, proclaiming the lordship of Jesus right under Caesar’s nose. Through the suffering, persecution, and martyrdom of the saints, the kingdom of Jesus has triumphed and will continue to triumph.

Brothers and sisters, we are that new creation. The wilderness has surrounded the Lord’s garden. Earthly empires and kings have tried to steal its fruit, they’ve tried to stamp it out and burn it down, but King Jesus has preserved it. Because of his preservation, past generations have carried the good news that Jesus is Lord from Jerusalem to Samaria and to all the world. Because King Jesus has preserved it we know and believe

that good news here in Canada, half a world away from that mount from which Jesus ascended to his throne two thousand years ago. Because King Jesus continues to preserve his new creation, we can have confidence to go out in faith, to charge into the darkness with the light of Christ, knowing that no matter what happens the kingdom of God is here and now and that nothing will stop it. As St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, this new creation of which we are a part is protected by the one who has been given all authority and who will reign until every last enemy is put under his feet, even death itself.

Our hope as Christians is in that day. Death is the last enemy to separate earth and heaven and on that day when Jesus finally defeats it he’ll return from his throne on the clouds as the angels told the disciples. As the joyful people of Rome went out to join their triumphant Caesar as he marched into the city as the conquering hero, St. Paul says that the people of Jesus will meet him in the air to accompany him as returns to earth the conquering hero—as he comes accompanied by heaven itself and restores earth and heaven.

Brothers and sisters, in the Old Testament the temple was the one place on earth where heaven and earth met and where the Lord could be known. When Jesus came he became the temple for us. The amazing thing is that Jesus didn’t leave it at that. He sent his Holy Spirit to fill and indwell us. We, his Church, are now the temple. We are now the place where heaven and earth connect and where the Lord is made known. And that’s our mission. Carved on our lychgate are those familiar words: “Jesus is Lord”. We pass beneath them as we come to the church to meet and to worship, but have you ever thought about what they really mean? The next time you walk under those words remember the Ascension. Remember that Jesus is seated on his throne, that

his kingdom is here and now, and that he has made us his people. We are his army, but not an army like those of Rome sent out to conquer barbarians with the sword. Jesus calls us to charge into the darkness bearing his light, to suffer and even to die for the sake of the lost as we seek to make known his love, his peace, his justice, his mercy, and especially his grace.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, in his Ascension you have raised Jesus to the place of kingship and authority. Let us never forget the significance of his rule. As we face the darkness, give us courage to shine his light brightly and to proclaim that he is Lord. Increase our understanding of your love and grace that we might manifest it to hostile world around us. And remind us, Father, to live in the hope of his sure return when all of his enemies have been subjected to his rule. In the meantime, as we wait for the restoration of heaven and earth, let us be faithful representative of your kingdom, making heaven visible and known to all around us. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and our Lord. Amen.