



LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Jesus is Lord

Acts 1:1-11 & St. Luke 24:49-53

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May 4, 2016 – Ascension Day

What's the significance of the Ascension? Every year the Church takes us through this cycle during the first half of the year, working through the life and ministry of Jesus. We start with Advent in preparation for Christmas. Jesus is born and then the holy days and the Scripture lessons eventually lead us through Lent to Holy Week. Jesus is crucified on Good Friday, he rises from death on Easter Sunday and then forty days later he ascends to heaven. And let's not forget that ten days later we remember and celebrate Pentecost. Ascension seems to be the forgotten holy day. We get Good Friday. Jesus died as a sacrifice for our sins. Because of Good Friday, because of the Cross we can be forgiven. And we get Easter. Jesus rising

from death is a big deal. That said, I think that for a lot of Christians that's about the only thing that makes Easter a big deal. I struggled with this when I wrote a paper about the Resurrection in University. The Cross was necessary in order for there to be atonement, but what purpose does the Resurrection serve? Sure, it's happy and exciting—Jesus isn't dead after all, but the real work was done on Friday when he died—or so I thought and so do a lot of people think.

Easter is important because in the Resurrection the Father vindicated his Son. Jesus claimed to be the Messiah. He came to be the world's true Lord. Some people, in faith, believed his claim, but the rest of the world rejected him. The world passed judgement on Jesus, denying his claim to be Messiah and Lord, and the world executed him. Yes, on Good Friday Jesus paid the penalty of our sin. He paid that penalty whether he rose from the grave or

not. But in rising from the grave he proved his claim was true. On Easter the Father over-ruled and overturned the false verdict of the world. The Resurrection declares that Jesus is the Messiah. It also tells us that the Good News is about more than mere forgiveness. In his death Jesus freed us from our bondage to sin, but in his resurrection he defeated and broke the chains of death. Because of the resurrection we have hope not just of forgiveness, but hope of new life in a new world. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians to live in hope, because Jesus is the firstfruits. What Jesus has done, what's happened to him, where he's gone is where we will follow if we are in him by faith.

But then there's the Ascension. We've got the same problem with the Ascension that we have with the Resurrection only, I think, more so. Jesus ascending to heaven it obviously good and great. It's worth celebrating, but do we

really grasp why he ascended? For many people the Ascension means that Jesus finished his work of redemption and has now gone “up to heaven” and someday we’ll go with him. But that’s not it. The very image itself of Jesus ascending into the clouds draws on Old Testament imagery, especially from Daniel, and it draws on the imagery of Imperial Rome.

In Daniel this figure called the son of man is persecuted and rejected by men, but he is then vindicated by God. He ascends to sit at the right hand of the Ancient of Days where he has authority to rule. Daniel writes that his kingdom shall have no end. That’s what the Ascension is about—Jesus taking his throne to rule until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

But in ascending, Jesus wasn’t just displaying imagery from the Old Testament. The Roman

emperors claimed themselves that when they died they ascended and became gods. If you stand under the Arch of Titus in Rome and look up you can see a depiction of the Emperor Titus’ feet as he ascends to heaven. Jesus draws on this imagery too and in doing that he directly challenges earthly emperors and their claims to divinity—whether Caesar or Pharaoh or even our modern leaders with their pride and god-complexes.

Remember, when the Bible uses these terms “heaven” and “earth” it’s not talking so much about physical locations as it is the realms of God and human beings. Heaven isn’t literally “up there” as if we could fly there in a plane or a space ship. The Ascension didn’t make Jesus the first astronaut. Jesus didn’t have to fly up into the clouds to get to heaven—to God’s realm. He could have just winked out of earth and winked in to heaven. But he chose to draw on this imagery as

he ascended—a very dramatic image of his going to take his throne. He is the son of man taking up the rule of his kingdom. He is Creation’s true Lord—not a pretender like Caesar. And because of his Resurrection—his body has been made new—somehow he’s as at home in heaven as he is on earth and at home on earth as he is in heaven. By our sin we sundered heaven and earth. Our sin separates us from God. But in Jesus that rift is healed. In Jesus—as in the temple in the Old Testament—heaven and earth are brought back together. It all gives us a foretaste of his making all things new. It gives us hope. We’ve been forgiven our sins, but we’ve also been given a promise of new life. One day we’ll be like Jesus. And when he comes back, bringing his kingdom with him, the creation broken by our sin will be restored, heaven and earth rejoined, and we can once again live in the presence of God.

This is the Good News and it's what Jesus has called us to proclaim. This was the mission he gave his disciples. To fulfil it he promised them the Holy Spirit—that's what Pentecost is about—and as they were standing their dumbfounded staring into the clouds, this was what the angels urged them to get busy about. "Why are you standing around looking into the sky? Didn't Jesus give you work to do?"

But as we proclaim the Good News, it's important to remember the story so we get it right. Our men's group watched a video a couple of weeks ago that's had me thinking ever since. The teacher was stressing how important it is that we get the story right so that we get the Good News itself right. He began by contrasting two well-known and prominent 19th Century Christians who have come to represent two major strains in the modern world of Evangelicalism.

The first was Dwight L. Moody, the famous revivalist. And he summed up Moody's theology with one quote: "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel, God has given me a lifeboat and said, 'Moody, save all you can.'" I don't want to disparage Moody's love for Jesus or his zeal for proclaiming the Good News. Would that any of us might have a tenth of his zeal for the Gospel. But the problem was that this isn't the whole Good News. Moody, in a sense, was preaching Good Friday, he was preaching the Cross, but he was missing out on the lordship of Jesus. This is the Gospel without the Ascension. Salvation for Moody was a personal issue and it was about escape from a dead world—a sinking ship. And over the last 150 years this has become the dominant understanding of the Gospel, especially in North American Evangelicalism.

In contrast consider another famous quote from Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian and statesman. Kuyper wrote, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" Brothers and Sisters, that's what the Ascension is about. In Moody's thought Jesus won redemption at the cross, but sin and death continue to rule this world and will one day bring it to its final death. Salvation is about escape. Jesus is lord, but really only in heaven.

In contrast Kuyper truly saw, as we sing, that in his ascension the Conqueror mounts his throne in triumph. Jesus didn't just ransom us from from sin and death, he defeated sin and death. He set in motion the remaking, the re-creation of all things. He established his lordship, not just in heaven, but over all Creation. For Moody God has given up on his fallen

creation and, through Jesus, simply seeks to rescue as many people as he can. For Kuyper God never gave up on his creation and never will—through Jesus he is at work not just rescuing, but restoring his creation—setting it all to rights.

Jesus' ascension is a visible representation of this. It's a visible representation of his lordship. And one day he will return on the clouds, just as he went, once every enemy has been vanquished. We could say that we today, as powerful as sin and death may seem to be in this world, we're now in the mopping up phase. The real victory was won that first Easter. He now calls us to go out to proclaim that he was conquered and that he is Lord. We're to call the world to rally to Jesus in faith. This is what he's equipped us for by giving the Holy Spirit. This is what it means to proclaim the Good News that Jesus is Lord. He is God's King, there is not a square inch of heaven or

earth that is not under his sovereignty. He has made us new so that, like Adam, we can bear his image in the world, making him known, and bringing his loving, merciful, and generous sovereignty to his Creation.