



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

See the Conqueror

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

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June 2, 2019 – Ascension Sunday

As you arrived this morning you passed through the lychgate into the churchyard. How many of you looked up as you walked under the lychgate? How many of you saw those words carved over the entrance? Those words that say, “Jesus is Lord”?

There are a number of ways that churches remind us of what it means to be a Christian and of our union with Jesus. The church Veronica and I attended when we lived over in Vancouver was entered through the baptistery. You couldn’t get into the church without having to walk in a semi-circle around the enormous font inside the church doors. The water in the font carries God’s promise of redemption and new life. At some point we each passed through those waters in faith to become part of the people of God. And the font, there at the entrance to the church, was a reminder every time we passed by it of God’s covenant promise and of God’s covenant faithfulness. Here, every time we walk through the lychgate, we’re reminded of the gospel itself. Here we’re reminded of whom we come to worship and why he’s worthy. Jesus is Lord. Brothers and Sisters, that’s the heart of the gospel.

And that’s why we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus. Year in and year out, during the first half of the calendar, the Church through scripture and prayer and liturgy leads us through the life of Jesus. The year begins in Advent as we anticipate his coming. Then, at Christmas, he arrives in humble majesty. At Epiphany we see the Jewish Messiah manifested to the Gentiles. Then, through Lent, we walk with him in his ministry as he makes his way to the Cross. On Good Friday we recall his death with sombre silence and yet, still

with joyful hearts, knowing that through his death comes the forgiveness of sins. And then that joy rises to its height on Easter as we celebrate the empty tomb and Jesus’ resurrection from death. At the Cross, evil rose up to its full height and did its worst, but on Sunday Jesus rose victorious over sin and death. He broke the chains. New creation went out from that empty tomb like a shockwave through Creation.

But the resurrection of Jesus did—or maybe better it signified—something else that often gets lost in the story. Jesus was the Messiah. That’s what “Christ” means. It’s not Jesus’ last name. It’s the Greek word for Messiah. And the Messiah was the long-hoped for and long-awaited king of Israel. Not just *a* king, but *the* king—the one who would lead the people in a new exodus, the one who would fix Israel’s heart problem, the one who would set this messed up world to rights. Of course, we read in the Gospels and then in Paul, a lot of the Jews had the Messiah all wrong. They’d misunderstood the plan that God had for the world and their place in it. They were like the postman given a letter and then keeping it for himself. And so they rejected Jesus. More specifically, they rejected Jesus as the Messiah. “We have no king but Caesar!” they shouted. “Crucify Jesus!” they cried. And so the resurrection of Jesus was more than just a happy ending to the story. The resurrection was God’s vindication of his Son. The world said, “He’s not the Messiah” and they killed him. But God overturned their verdict and turned their violent act of hate and rebellion into an act of redemption through which he revealed his King.

And so, for forty days, the risen Jesus walked and talked with his disciples. Luke says that he explained the Scriptures to them so that they would understand the story, his place in it, and theirs too. And he says that this risen Jesus was glorious. He was the same and different at the same time. It took a while for his friends to recognise him. But he was as human as ever. He sat on the beach and ate fish with them. I can imagine Jesus juggling the hot fish from one hand to another and gingerly biting into it lest he burn himself. He was as human as ever, but he was more.

Appearing in a locked and sealed room and then disappearing just as quickly. The resurrected Jesus was as at home on earth as he was in heaven and at home in heaven as much as one earth. And that’s what we see today as we remember and celebrate his ascension.

In our Epistle we read those first eleven verses of the book of Acts and then in the Gospel we read the last verses from St. Luke. Luke says that forty days after the resurrection, Jesus led his disciples out of Jerusalem and up to the Mount of Olives. He promised them that John the Baptist’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—not 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 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 much of the popular theology of today, and that's that the kingdom is here and the kingdom is now. The kingdom is 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 suspect he may have said that with a smile, 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. King's don't sit on thrones to rule over nothing. Why is the Ascension important? Again, it tells us dramatically and unmistakably that the King is one his throne and that his kingdom has already been inaugurated.

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 tabernacle and then 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. "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," God promised (Genesis 12:3).

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, the representative of Israel. 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. The Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper summed it up well in that famous line of his: "There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" Others, like Caesar may make their claims, but the reality is that Jesus is Lord of all.

Brothers and Sisters, we are God's 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 Judea 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 know 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. Jesus has restored us to the vocation for which we were created. He has restored God's image in us. He has made us the people in whom heaven and earth meet. He's given us the gospel message: the

King who died and has risen from the grave is Lord. And he sends us out like Adam and Eve with that good news, to be fruitful and to multiply—to carry the royal summons to our friends, our families, and eventually to every corner of creation, spreading his kingdom. We've seen the Conqueror mount in triumph and now we go out as 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 the 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.