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The Ascension of Our Lord

May 29, 2014

Text: Ephesians 1:15–23

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Some might wonder what compels people to go to church on a beautiful spring Thursday evening at the end of May. If you tell them the Ascension of Our Lord you might get perplexed looks. Let's face it. Ascension doesn't make a dint in the day to day lives of most people. There are no Ascension day parades, no cultural activities associated with this particular event. Good Friday, people sort of understand. Easter, that's joyous and fun. Christmas Eve, any day of the week people will come to Church and at any time as evidenced by the "midnight mass." But celebrating the Lord's Ascension back to the Father's right hand just doesn't make the cut.

That shouldn't bother us too much. What Jesus did for forty days after His resurrection didn't draw many crowds either. Do you realize that Jesus didn't perform any healing miracles after His resurrection? The Lord appears and disappears in an instant but He never heals a fevered brow. He doesn't raise the dead, cast out demons, or make the blind to see or the lame to walk. Luke, the author of the book of Acts describes Jesus' post-resurrection ministry with these words, "To them Jesus presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

The "many proofs" refer to the Lord appearing among the disciples alive after everyone knew He had been crucified. But not miracles. Instead, Jesus went about preaching the Kingdom, not publicly but to His disciples alone. Luke's gospel tells us what Jesus used to preach the Kingdom, "the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). You might describe those 40 days as a post-graduate level intensive class entitled "OT Christology" or "New Testament Kingdom Theology According to the OT."

Like I said, people just don't flock to the Church on a beautiful spring Thursday evening to celebrate Christ's Ascension. But for those of us who do, the time is more

than worth it. For on this Day, all that Jesus said and did, including His death and resurrection, comes to its most glorious and natural conclusion. Ascension Day is the Lord's Coronation Day.

On Good Friday, Jesus victoriously died, making atonement for the sins infecting all creation. On Easter, Jesus rose triumphantly, forever breaking the rule and reign of Death and the Devil, thus ensuring the resurrection unto eternal life for all of God's holy people. On Ascension, Jesus returns back to heaven where He is crowned Lord of all and takes His place at the Father's right hand to rule and reign over all creation for the good of His beloved Church.

Some might object. Wasn't Jesus king even before His death, resurrection, and ascension? To be sure but He had to win His kingdom back from the evil forces of sin and death and Satan. Christmas is the story of God invading enemy-occupied territory in order to bring it back under its rightful dominion. Jesus' healing and teaching ministry was divine warfare repulsing evil and signaling to all creation that God was in Christ fixing this mess humanity has made for itself. Good Friday and Easter was the decisive battle. Satan and evil were utterly routed by Jesus. He has secured for Himself an eternal kingdom established in His own redemptive death; this kingdom cannot be defiled for He rose from the dead never to see corruption again.

Ascension is the triumphant king returning in all glory, honor, power, and majesty to be enthroned and installed over the kingdom He just won for Himself and His people. Revelation 5 is the apocalyptic vision of Jesus' ascension back to the Father's right hand. All heaven rejoices and worships for Jesus alone conquered and was found worthy to open the seven seals of creation's destiny. All the heavenly hosts, according to Revelation 5:12, breaks into a loud coronation hymn saying, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And then, as if the heavenly worship wasn't enough, Revelation 5:13 says, "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, (cried out) saying, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!'"

This is what Ascension Day is all about! King Jesus now rules and reigns over all creation with the power and might of God the Father Himself for the good of His beloved Church! Lest you think I exaggerate, I invite you to find Ephesians 1:15–23 in your bulletin. Keep in mind the outrageous claims I keep making about the Ascension: 1) Jesus is crowned king, 2) He sits at the right hand of God the Father, 3)

from there He rules and reigns over all creation, 4) for the good of His Church! The 4<sup>th</sup> point is the most audacious claim. All that Jesus does in all creation is for the benefit of His beloved Church.

This passage of Scripture is really a prayer prayed by the apostle Paul for the Ephesian Christians. Vs. 16, “I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.” Vs. 17 begin listing Paul’s requests, “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge him...” Paul desires that God the Father would give God’s people a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that (vs. 18), “having the eyes of your hearts enlightened ... you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints...” Stop there for a moment. Did you catch that last phrase? God the Father has a glorious inheritance in the saints! You are the Father’s glorious inheritance; made all the more glorious because of the Lord Jesus. It’s not without reason you are called a dear treasure to God. So much could be said about this but let’s continue.

Paul’s prayer includes a request that the Father would open our eyes to see what the Father accomplished (vs. 20–21) “in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.” These two verses cover my first 3 points: 1) Jesus is crowned before all the heavenly hosts 2) in order to rule and reign from the Father’s right hand, 3) over all creation, both the old and new creations. Notice the superlatives! Jesus is far above all rule and authority and His name is above every name! Compared to Jesus, nothing and no one even comes close. He is superior to all because He is not only the Son of God the Father almighty but He’s the obedient Son who accomplished the Father’s will to establish an eternal kingdom by dying, rising from the dead, and ascending back to heaven.

The Father’s right hand is a powerful metaphor that describes the totality of Christ’s power and authority. As you know, the Bible teaches that God the Father is a spirit without a literal, physical body. Thus, the Father does not have a literal right hand. The phrase “the right hand of the Father” refers to God’s power, dominion, and authority. In the ancient world, the right hand was the hand of power. Jesus possesses all divine power and authority for He sits at the Father’s hand of power, His right hand.

With that authority and power, Jesus reigns over this age and the age to come. Nothing exists outside Jesus' rule. Nothing. Can there be a more comforting thought for us Christians? For King Jesus is no petty tyrant abusing His power for His own selfish desires.

That leads to the 4<sup>th</sup> point, the most audacious of them all. Vs. 22, God the Father "put all things under his feet (i.e., Christ's feet) and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." All creation is placed under Christ's authority for the benefit of the Church which is Christ's body. It is through the Church and for the Church that Jesus reigns over all things. That's a bold claim. The Jesus who is crowned king over all creation at the Father's right hand is also the head of His beloved Church.

All of God's redemptive love, all of His omnipotent power, all of His desire to bring you complete and perfect fulfillment is found in the ascended Lord Jesus Christ. That's why we gather tonight. You are the body of Jesus. He is your head, ruling and reigning over all creation for Your eternal good.

Maybe, just maybe we can indulge in a little liturgical license. Instead of saying, "Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!" maybe we should say, "Alleluia! Christ is ascended! He is ascended indeed. Alleluia!"

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.