

THE HIGHEST AUTHORITY

Ephesians 1:15-23

The Ascension of Our Lord—observed (Series B)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The epistle lesson for The Ascension of Our Lord comes from *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, chapter 1, verses 15 through 23. In this epistle lesson, the apostle Paul explains a great hope we have, both in this life and in the next. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Ephesians 1, beginning at verse 15, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁵ For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ 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. ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

So where is he now?

Jesus rose from the dead. Breath returned to his lungs. His heart resumed pumping blood. His brain began sending impulses again. And his once-dead cells went back to doing alive things. Jesus came back to life. And he appeared to many of his disciples. So what happened? Where is he now? Did he die again? No. If he died again, we would have his tomb somewhere. Is he still walking around somewhere, healing people and passing out fish sandwiches? No. If he were still doing that, we'd see him on the news, probably every day. So where is he? Jesus has ascended into heaven.

This is what we read about in both of the earlier readings, from Acts 1 and Luke 24. Jesus was carried up into heaven. And in the text we just read from Ephesians, we heard about what happened when Jesus got to heaven. God the Father “seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places” (1:20). So where is Jesus now? He is in heaven at the Father's right hand.

The ascension of Jesus Christ might be the most underrated event in Jesus' life. That's hard to say with any certainty, because I'm not aware of any official rankings. But Jesus' ascension into heaven has to be a top-five event, but we probably don't think about it very often. I am quite sure we don't think about it in the moments we should think about it, which are quite often.

So we're going to explore three things concerning Jesus' ascension: First, what it is. Second, what it means for us. And third, what we should do because of it.

First, what it is. It is the bodily ascension of Jesus into heaven.

Let's have a little quiz—I mean, “celebration of academic achievement.” True or false: *Jesus is still a man?* True or false? This is true. Jesus is still a man. He never gave up the human nature. His human body was raised from the dead and transformed. So his human nature is different than ours, but he is still human. And he is not less human than we are. If anything, he is more human, because he is human in the way God initially designed man to be. The image of God, which was lost in the fall into sin, is restored in the risen Jesus. Our nature has been corrupted. Jesus' human nature is exactly how God designed man to be. So Jesus is different than we are. There's no doubt about that. Exactly how different is he? We can't really say. We don't really know how much we lost in the fall into sin. The only human being who perfectly bears the image of God is Jesus Christ. And we do not see him now. So Jesus is different than we are, but it's not because he shed his human nature; it's because he has a perfect human nature, and we do not.

Jesus is still human. We saw this in the resurrection. The very same human body that died was raised from the dead. And he appeared to his disciples in bodily form. We also see it in the ascension. Jesus was lifted up, bodily, from the earth. The disciples watched until a cloud surrounded him and carried him into heaven. They witnessed all of this happening to Jesus' body. And Scripture continues to speak of Jesus as a man. For example, in 1 Timothy 2:5, the apostle Paul says, “There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ.” We also have the angels' words at the ascension. While the disciples were staring up into the sky, which is the natural thing to do when you see someone float away, they said to the disciples, “Why do you stand looking up into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Jesus is still a man, and he will continue to be a man. Just as he ascended in bodily form, he will also descend to earth in bodily form.

Jesus is both God and man. And he is all of both. He is not part God and part man. He is fully God, and he is fully man. He has both complete natures in one person. This is the doctrine of the two natures in Christ. And this is the second great mystery of the Christian faith. The first great mystery is the Trinity. And the second great mystery is the two natures in Christ. He is true God and true man in one person. The natures are not mixed together into one nature, and the person is not divided into two persons. He is one person with two distinct natures. If you don't fully understand how that can be, that's why we call it a “mystery.” It's not a secret, because we know what it is. But it's a mystery, because we cannot comprehend the fullness of it. Everything Jesus does, he does as a complete person. We don't divide up of his activity and say, “The human nature did this thing, and the divine nature did that thing.” The divine nature enables him to do certain things the human nature is not capable of doing, and sometimes the human nature even enables him to do things the divine nature is not capable of doing. But everything he does, he does it as a complete person. So the miracle of Good Friday is that God died. It's not simply that the human nature died, but the person, Jesus Christ, who is both God and man, died. And the miracle of the resurrection is that a man came back to life. It was not merely the divine nature that was raised, but the person, Jesus Christ, who is both God and man, rose from the dead. And the miracle of the ascension is that a man ascended into heaven, because Jesus, as both God and man, ascended into heaven, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father. That's what the ascension of Jesus is.

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Now, what does it mean for us? There are three basic benefits of Jesus' ascension.

Number one: Jesus has opened heaven for all mankind. Think about this: a man now lives in heaven. Jesus is the firstfruits from the dead. That's how Scripture describes his resurrection. Prior to Jesus' resurrection, other people had come back to life, but not permanently. We should maybe call those "resuscitations," because they were not raised to the same incorruptible life that Jesus was raised to. So there's a difference between a resuscitation and a resurrection. We think of Lazarus, who was one of at least three people whom Jesus resuscitated. The nice thing was that Lazarus got to be alive again. The bummer for Lazarus was that he had to die twice. But Jesus did not die twice. He is the firstfruits from among the dead. That means that he is the pattern for how we will be resurrected. When Jesus appears on the Last Day "we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). And he is also the firstfruits of the ascension. He will take us with him to where he is now. Jesus has opened heaven for all mankind. Just as he lives in heaven with his perfected human nature, we also will live in heaven with perfectly restored human natures. That's the first benefit of Jesus' ascension.

Second, Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth. That's what it means that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father. It does not mean that for the last two thousand years, Jesus has just been sitting in the same throne next to the Father's throne. That would be kind of silly. It's like when a boss has a "right hand man." It doesn't mean that person perpetually stands to the right of the boss. You'd have to do a weird maneuver every time you get on an elevator, and walking through doors would be difficult. Being the "right hand man" means that the boss goes to him first when he needs something done, and when he does something or says something, it carries the authority of the boss. Being at the right hand is a position of authority.

And this is how Paul explains it for us. "[God] 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. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church" (1:20-22). Being seated at the Father's right hand means that Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth.

And this is a great benefit to us. Jesus has all authority. He has all authority now. He has all authority over things on earth. That's what Paul means when he says, "Not only in this age but also in the one to come." Our minds are often fixed on the affairs of this world. And we become obsessed with the power struggles of this earth. Who has power? What are they doing with their power? How can I get power? How will I serve myself or my group when I get that power? That's identity politics. It's wicked. And it seems to be the way this world is governed. It is not God's will for the authorities he has instituted. God instituted authority to serve all those under their authority, not just those who helped them get power.

We've been talking about authority a lot lately, because our world is obsessed with power. And there's a difference between power and authority. Power is just the raw ability to do something, regardless of whether or not you have a right to do it and regardless of whether or not that thing is good. But authority is the ability and the right to do what is good and just for all those under the authority. Authority always exists to serve those under the authority. This is how Jesus exercised his authority on earth. He cast out demons and healed the sick. Most importantly, he suffered and died to redeem us from sin and death. This was the ultimate service. And now, at the Father's right hand, Jesus continues to use his authority to serve us. He does not use his authority to serve himself. That would be an abuse of power. But he uses it to serve us. That's authority. And every earthly authority must do the same, because they are under the authority of

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Jesus. It may seem at times that certain authorities have no one above them. This is an illusion. Every earthly authority is under the authority of Jesus, even if they don't know it. This should be a great comfort to us. We do not elect supreme rulers. When some dictator claims supreme power for himself, he is deceived. They are all under the authority of Jesus. They may still do evil things, but Jesus sets limits to the evil they can inflict. Even the devil is under the authority of Jesus. Jesus is the supreme authority.

This, by the way, is why the Church can, and sometimes must, speak regarding matters of government. It's a difficult thing to do, and we don't do it a lot. It might make you uncomfortable to hear it, and you might think a pastor should never speak to anything political. And I would agree that we shouldn't do it a lot, because God has instituted governmental authority. Jesus did not institute the Church to run the civil affairs of the world. He instituted civil government to do that, and we should let them do their thing. But the Church has a prophetic role regarding the actions of the state. What I mean is, since our authorities are under the authority of Jesus Christ, it is appropriate for the Church to speak the Word of God to the state. The Church does not have authority over the state, but we do speak the Word of the one who has authority over the state. Our authorities should know that they are under the authority of Jesus, and they should know what the will of God is. And all of us, as voters or future voters, should know what the will of God is. The Church has a prophetic voice. And that voice is the Word of God. So the Church can and should speak, for example, when we see the abuse of authority. We can and should speak up for the rights of children, because they have no representation and are the most likely members of our society to be treated unjustly. The Church can, and sometimes must, speak regarding matters of government. That is because we have the Word of God, and every authority is under the authority of Jesus.

So we have some responsibility to remind people of this authority, but most of all it is simply a great comfort to us, knowing that Jesus is exercising that authority. That's the second benefit of Jesus' ascension.

And the third benefit is that Jesus is with us always. This is the one that might seem backward. Heaven seems like a long ways away. And maybe it is. Or maybe it just seems that way to us, because we have no ability to reach it. But it is not so far for the one who sits at the Father's right hand. Before Jesus ascended, he said to his disciples, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Then he ascended, but he did not leave, because he ascended to fill all things. This is what the apostle Paul teaches in this epistle lesson: "[God] put all things under his 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" (1:22-23). This is the attribute of God which we call "omnipresence." It means he is present in all places. I suppose we could say that the distance from heaven to earth is not as far as the distance from earth to heaven, not for Jesus anyway. The distance from heaven to earth is not even as far as the distance from one place on earth to another place on earth, because a person on earth cannot truly say, "I am with you always." Eventually they go to work or the grocery store or somewhere else, and they are no longer "with you." Even when Jesus was on earth, he confined himself to one place. This was part of his humiliation. He always possessed all the attributes of the divine nature, but for the time of his humiliation, he did not access them. So while he was on earth, he confined himself to one location. But now he has ascended to be with us always. That is the third benefit of Jesus' ascension.

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So let's review. These are the three main benefits of Jesus' ascension: One, he has opened heaven to mankind. Two, he possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. And three, he is with us always.

And this should lead us to do one very important thing. We should pray. When we realize that our Savior, who loved us to the extent that he died for us, has now ascended into heaven, we should pray. He is with us always, and he is at the Father's right hand, with all rule, authority, power, and dominion under his feet. This should lead us to pray. He is the supreme authority, and his ear is open to us.

When I said that we probably don't think of the ascension of Jesus very often, and we certainly don't think of it in the moments we should think of it, I mean that we should really be thinking of it all the time. When something good happens, we pat ourselves on the back or thank someone else who may be responsible for that good thing. But we should especially remember that Jesus is at the Father's right hand with all authority. And we should say, "Jesus be praised." Or when something bad happens, and we see the evil around us and throughout the world, we look to lesser authorities, as if they really have the power to stop wars, quell viruses, and fix the economy. They are under the authority of Jesus. Jesus has instituted them, which means that in one sense, they really do have a lot of power, because Jesus has given it to them. And in another sense, they really have no power at all, because they are merely instruments Jesus uses to govern this world. So who should we really look to? Should we look to lesser authorities who, even if they do care about us, cannot possibly listen to all of us at the same time? Or should we look to our Savior King, who has ascended into heaven and is still with us in all places and at all times? The ascension of Jesus should lead us to pray. And our prayers are weak. There's no doubt about that. But they are powerful because of who hears them. We pray because our Savior-King has all power and authority, he loves us, and his ear is open to us. Prayer is simply taking advantage of the benefits of Jesus' ascension.

Where is Jesus now? He has ascended into heaven, and is seated at the Father's right hand. And he is there to bless us. He has opened heaven for us to join him there. He exercises authority over all things. And he is even still with us at all times and in all places. Rejoice! Jesus has ascended for you. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.