

The Ascension

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 May 2018

Preacher: Rev. Daniel Beilman

[0 : 0 0] You may remember me mentioning feast days. Next Sunday is a feast day. It's the Feast of Pentecost. And the week after that is Trinity Sunday. This past Thursday was a feast day.

You might have guessed from our liturgy so far, it was the Feast of the Ascension. The Feast of the Ascension, 40 days after Jesus rose from the dead, and having appeared to his disciples and to many witnesses, he ascended into heaven, as we heard from the book of Luke and the book of Acts.

Many churches don't have a special service on that Thursday. So like ourselves, we recognize that event, that historical event here the Sunday after.

So this is what I'll be doing tonight, talking about the Ascension, what it is, how is it about love, and how does it benefit us? What is the Ascension, how is it about love, and how does it benefit us?

So as we look at the Ascension of Jesus Christ, let's pray to him. King Jesus, we are here to honor you, and we ask that as you promise to send your Holy Spirit, that you would have him at work among us, glorifying yourself.

[1 : 2 1] Help us to catch a vision of who you really are, that we might worship you as your disciples did. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Okay, so what happened at the Ascension? As we heard in Acts chapter 1, Jesus said to his disciples, It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father is fixed by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, he will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. Now, when I was young, I've heard about the Ascension all my life, and I had imagined something like spaceflight for Jesus, or something like Neo from the Matrix, just zooming up way into the high sky, and just disappearing into the clouds, probably with a burst of light, too.

But the text says that he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. So I would imagine that he actually wasn't elevated too far.

[2 : 5 6] Albrecht Durer has a great woodprint, of the Ascension. You see his disciples looking up in awe, and just above them, you see Jesus' feet, and nothing else. He was probably, I think, that close.

He never got too far, nor does he stay far. And I think that's the point of Durer's woodcut. After two angels appear and ask, Why do you stand looking into heaven?

So what's going on here in this passage? Let's talk about the biblical conceptions of heaven and earth. And we're not to think of heaven and earth as two separate realms occupying their own separate spaces, like two halves of the same orange.

Rather, we understand heaven and earth as interlocking dimensions. Heaven being God's space, and the earth or the physical universe or space time as being our space.

God's space interpenetrates our own so that you could think of heaven as being the solid, concrete inner reality. Heaven is not a different place than our own dimension, up there, the happy place where people go after they die.

[4 : 11] Now, when we read about a singular cloud taking Jesus out of the sight of the disciples, you might remember from the Old Testament the significance of a cloud.

A cloud shows us, it manifests the special presence or glory of God. The presence of God.

For instance, when a pillar of cloud led the Israelites out of Egypt, out of slavery, or perhaps several times in the Old Testament when a cloud or smoke enveloped or filled the temple, displaying a special manifestation of the presence of the Lord.

What Luke is saying is this. Jesus, in his physical resurrected body, has passed into God's dimension. A dimension now where Jesus is everywhere present.

Jesus, not the temple in Jerusalem as was believed, it's Jesus that is the place where the two dimensions of heaven and earth meet, where they join, where they intersect.

[5 : 24] And just as Jesus ascended into heaven 40 days after his resurrection, so too will he one day descend. And on that day, which is called the second coming, the two dimensions will be brought together and united.

The ascension is a promise that we will one day inhabit a new heavens and a new earth, just as we pray every week, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

There's something else. This is pretty great. There's something else about this passage. Now, Romans believed, or those in the Roman Empire believed, that upon his death, a Roman emperor's soul would escape his body and ascend to heaven.

It's called an apotheosis. And you can go to Rome and see on the Titian Arch, the Arch of Titus, like right in the middle underneath, there is an image of Titus ascending to heaven.

This is to demonstrate, to depict a Roman emperor becoming a god. And what Jesus does in the ascension is he one-ups the emperors.

[6 : 47] The ascension proclaims that Jesus is the true king. He not just ascends spiritually as a ghost, he ascends body and soul fully into heaven.

The ascension proclaims that Jesus is the true king and the Roman emperors are just parodies. Upon his ascension, Jesus ascends to his throne.

It's a demonstration of God's exaltation to the throne of the universe. Ephesians chapter 1, verse 20, as we heard earlier. 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.

So that's the ascension. But it's not just a large cosmic idea. It's also very personal and intimate. The ascension is about love.

It's about love. It fits into the entire story of the Bible. God's love for his people. God's love for you. You see, the Bible from the beginning to the end tells a story of marriage.

[8 : 16] There's a wedding in the book of Genesis in the very first two chapters. Throughout the Bible, we see God describing his relationship to his people as that of a husband to his bride.

And that love is embodied when Jesus, the word, is made flesh. When he is born in Bethlehem. Jesus began his ministry at a wedding.

His first miracles were performed at a wedding in Cana. And the whole story concludes with a heavenly marriage. I should have been going this way, right? With a heavenly marriage.

in paradise between Jesus and his people. You see, the story of the Bible is God wants to marry us.

He wants to marry us. It's printed almost on every page of the Bible. Now, in a Hebrew wedding, we find different customs than we have in our modern day wedding.

[9 : 17] How does a Hebrew wedding work? Well, after a betrothal in which a price is paid for a bride, the groom would go away. He would leave. And he would build onto his father's house another room.

A room for himself and his bride. And at a later time, determined by the father, the groom would come back to fetch the bride. There would be a wedding.

And the wedding would be consummated. Well, the night before Jesus dies, he tells his disciples in John chapter 14, in my father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself that where I am, you may also be. That's a wedding language. Jesus is using a language we find all throughout Scripture.

The ascension demonstrates that Jesus is betrothed to us and as the angels said, he's going to come back just the way he left. He's going to fetch his bride and there's going to be a wedding.

[10 : 26] So the ascension is about love. And if it's about love, how does that love that is demonstrated in the ascension benefit us?

So we, every week, we recite the Nicene Creed. There's also another creed that we recite in our daily prayers called the Apostles' Creed. And at various times, the church wisely has produced a tool called a catechism, which is a question and answer way of teaching the truths of the Christian faith, particularly in the creeds.

And my favorite one, is that weird that I have a favorite catechism? Yes, but I have one. It's the Heidelberg Catechism. And there is the question of what advantage to us is Christ's ascension into heaven?

And the catechism gives us three answers. First, that he is our advocate in the presence of his Father in heaven. Second, that we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that he, as the head, will also take us up to himself.

Third, that he sends us his spirit as an earnest by whose power we seek the things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God and not things on earth.

[11 : 48] Let's work backwards. We're going to start with the third one, is that he sends us his spirit as an earnest. Next week, we're going to hear what is essentially part two of this sermon about how Jesus sends the Holy Spirit upon the church on the day of Pentecost.

And the spirit indwells and empowers God's church to go out into the world to serve him and to proclaim the good news of the gospel. But for now, let's consider that as Jesus prepared his disciples for his departure, he promised them that he wasn't abandoning them.

Right? If this whole thing is about intimacy, it doesn't make much sense to leave. But it's quite the opposite. They would experience, his disciples would experience, and we would experience an intimacy with God that had not yet been possible.

He says in John chapter 16, it is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.

God will not come to you. Our souls were made for connection with God. He wired us to feel at home in his presence like we were in the Garden of Eden.

[13 : 19] God made humanity to experience deep intimacy with himself. The love and intimacy of God was to be the ocean in which humanity swam.

But when Adam and Eve fell, mankind was like a fish that was scooped out of the water and dropped into the middle of the forest. Gary Moon writes, ever since the fall, every human heart has experienced a longing to go home, to live in love with God and one another.

Jesus knew that. he came to earth with the wonderful news that God invites us to come home. He has opened wide the gate to Eden. He's banished the guards, freshly manicured the grounds, kicked out the snakes.

The ascension heals the schism that occurred at the fall. The ascension makes intimacy possible. In the garden, we are to be continually in his presence and now after the ascension when Jesus sends his spirit, the presence of God now resides in each of God's children and each of us are now at home with God in his presence.

Looking backwards, we looked at how at the ascension Jesus sends his spirit. Second, we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that he as the head will also take up to himself, us, his members.

[14 : 54] Strange kind of wording and language. Basically, it means we're united to Christ. We've been talking about marriage. We're in union with him. So where he is, he is also.

What benefits he has accrued, we accrue as well. As we heard in Ephesians chapter 1 verse 20, that God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.

So just a few verses later in chapter 2 verse 6, Paul writes and raised us up with him. God raised us up with Jesus and seated us with him in the heavenly places.

He uses a perfect tense, a completed verb. That's how sure our place is in heaven with God in the afterlife.

there's a hymn that I really like. My name from the palms of his hands eternity will not erase. Impressed on his heart, it remains in marks of indelible grace.

[16 : 04] Yes, I to the end shall endure as sure as the earnest is given. More happy, but not more secure, the glorified spirits in heaven.

That's kind of a word salad of those last two lines, basically. It means that those souls that are already in the presence of the Father, qualitatively, yes, no one's going to deny they're happier than we are because they're with the Father in a way that we're not.

However, their place in heaven is not more secure than ours. Isn't that amazing? Their place in heaven isn't more secure than ours because Jesus is there and we're united to him.

That's how secure our place is with the Father. Hear how we are described in Ephesians chapter 1 verse 18. May God give you the spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him 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? That's up there? One more verse.

[17 : 24] There we go. This is very difficult to translate for translators. And even when they translate it correctly, it's still hard to exactly get what Paul's writing. But what he is not saying is that in this case, we are to receive an inheritance, even though this is true.

We read it all the time in the New Testament. the inheritance belongs to God and we are the inheritance. God has prepared us as his own inheritance, as his own riches, and God is not going to give that up.

That's how precious we are. That's how precious we are. He's going to secure us, and he's done that by having his son ascend to his right hand and in union with him. Now we are ascended.

We are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. So that's second. Lastly, what benefit is us of the ascension, it's that we have an advocate in the presence of the Father.

We have an advocate. Romans 8 34 says, Christ Jesus is the one who died, more than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

[18 : 38] what does that mean that he's interceding for us? I think it means two things. The first is that we don't have to fear that we are not enough.

We don't have to worry or fear that we are not enough. I think a lot of us have that concern.

A lot of us are preoccupied that we might not be enough, talented enough, musically talented enough, that's my own, clever enough, handsome or beautiful enough, successful enough, charismatic enough.

We're always worried, what do people think of me? What does the Father think of me? You know who experiences this most poignantly?

It's mothers. Mothers are always fearing that they're not enough, that they're not loving enough, nurturing enough, present enough, patient enough.

[19 : 51] Most mothers, I think, would just love to not completely screw up their kids. That's a win. Mothers feel like they're not enough. But in the gospel, the ascended Christ says to the Father, I am enough.

I am enough. My obedience was enough. My righteousness is enough. Look on my wounds. That's enough. I have taken all the punishment that my people deserve.

I am enough. When Satan tempts me to despair, tells me of the guilt within, upward, I look and see him there who made an end to all my sin.

Because the sinless savior died, my sinful soul is counted free. For God, the just, is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.

Because Christ is enough. I am enough. I never lack for anything. If Christ is enough, which makes ourselves enough, then we run the danger of, if we're not grasping that, then we run the danger of this constant doing, of trying to be enough, of trying to earn God's attention, earn his favor.

[21 : 23] It's dangerous for our souls. The hymn writer James Proctor wrote, weary, working, burdened one, why do you toil so?

Cease your doing. All was done long, long ago. Cast your deadly doing down, down at Jesus' feet. Stand in him, in him alone, gloriously complete.

The ascended Christ, stands at the right hand of the father. We stand in him. He is our advocate in the presence of his father.

He is assured our place in the presence of the father forever and he sends us his holy spirit so that we are always at home in the presence of God all because of love.

The ascension is about love. Let's pray. Father, just as the disciples caught a glimpse of glory and majesty and were left in awe so would you strike us with awe and wonder.

[22 : 55] would we be in awe of your son of his humility of his suffering of his death and because of all of that therefore you have exalted him to the highest place that at the name of your son Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that your son Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of your name father help us now to proclaim his glory fill us with wonder we pray in Jesus name the risen and ascended savior amen amen