

The Festival We Forget

Luke 24: 44-53; Acts 1:1-11

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Have you made your plans for the festival this week? Oh yes, there is a Christian feast day this coming Thursday, one that we mention nearly every week as we recite one of the creeds, but also one that we largely ignore. You see this Thursday is Ascension Day; a day that commemorates the ascension of Christ into heaven some forty days following the resurrection. According to Luke in both of his books, the third Gospel and the book of Acts, Jesus appeared to many of his disciples for some forty days after the resurrection and then leads them out to the Mount of Olives where he instructs them to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Holy Spirit. And then, according to Luke, as the disciples watch he ascends into the clouds while angels declare that he would return in glory the same way.

Now for Roman Catholics, Ascension Day is one of the six holy days where attendance at Mass is mandatory. Anglicans and Episcopalians often have services as well on this day. But in the Presbyterian and Reformed faith we never have been too big on feast days in general or even liturgical seasons for that matter. The Lutherans recognize and celebrate Ascension Day and you may have noticed that there are many Lutheran churches named Ascension. Luther after all said that if the Bible didn't forbid it, it was probably okay in terms of worship practices. But John Calvin believed that if the Bible did not commend it, it probably was not okay. That is why Queen Elizabeth I attached the term "*Reformed*" to the followers of Zwingli and Calvin saying that they were more "*reformed*" than the Lutherans, in that they argued for a more thoroughgoing reformation of worship and theology based on their understanding of the Bible.

But wait a minute, you may be thinking, the ascension of Jesus Christ is certainly biblical, is it not? Indeed it is and we certainly do affirm the ascension of Christ as a doctrine and as a significant moment in the life of Christ. It is just that the Bible is silent with respect to setting aside a day or a festival for celebrating this. Bible interpreters have always struggled to determine which practices of God's people are descriptive and which are proscriptive.

I suppose we in the Reformed faith have mellowed a bit over the years. Critics may say that we have acquiesced. But the fact remains that in Presbyterian and Reformed churches today seasons like Advent and Lent and festivals like Ascension Day and Pentecost are at least recognized if not enthusiastically celebrated.

I thought it might be good to save this discussion of the ascension of Jesus until the day fell on a Sunday. But then I realized that since it is always 40 days after Easter then it will always be on a Thursday. So today let us examine the ascension and what difference it makes for us as followers of Christ. What is it that we really believe about the ascension and how should this belief impact our life and witness?

The truth is that we have probably not given much thought to the ascension of Christ, and if we have we probably fall somewhere between those who take it extremely literally, believing that Jesus was somehow miraculously swept away on a fluffy cloud and physically transported higher into the atmosphere up there somewhere, where he is now permanently seated on something like a loveseat at the right hand of the Father; or, we are among those who regard the ascension as a symbolic and theological attempt to say that Jesus has been received by God the Father, whose presence is frequently symbolized by a cloud in Hebrew thought, and transferred not to a new place but to a new position of power and glory which is far more significant than a good seat among the clouds.

I heard of a children's Sunday school class that was asked to describe God the Father as the best they could. They said the standard things that young children would say about God until one little chap offered that he knew that God was left-handed. "And why do you say that?" asked his teacher. "Because Jesus is sitting on his right hand," came the reply. I guess this little fellow would be considered within the literalist camp!

Today, rather than speculating on what actually may have happened there on the Mt. of Olives, since frankly it remains a great mystery when all said and done, I would prefer to discuss what the ascension means and its significance when we affirm that Jesus "*ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*" What is the truth behind this vivid imagery and what were the New Testament writers and framers of the ecumenical creeds trying to convey to and for the disciples of Jesus Christ? Furthermore, how can we apply the truths of the doctrine of the ascension of Christ to our lives as disciples here in the twenty-first century?

To begin with, I believe that the ascension and exultation of Jesus is meant to be a powerful affirmation of precisely of who this Jesus is and thus is meant to move us to greater awe and more fervent praise. True, because Jesus is the Crucified One, he is also the Savior of sinners, and that fact we celebrate. And because he is the Resurrected One, we also declare that he is the victor over sin, death and the forces of evil. But because Jesus is now ascended and exalted we need to recognize as never before that Jesus is now the Lord of the universe who shares in the sovereign universal governance of God.

Much in Christianity rightly focuses our attention on the humanity of God, on the fact that in the person of Jesus, God had come among us in humility and gentleness and love, identifying

with us and even taking the form of servant. God in Christ suffers and serves, girding himself with a towel and washing our feet and calling upon us to do the same in his name. This is “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” and we need to profess this truth about him. But my friends, the ascension and exaltation of the crucified and resurrected one reminds us of “the rest of the story” as the late broadcaster Paul Harvey used to say.

Jesus may have come once in humility and weakness, but now he reigns in majesty and power. He may have come once as the Lamb of God, but now he resembles more the Lion of Judea. (An Ascension Day tradition in England has parishioners processing carrying two banners. The first bears the symbol of a lion at the head of the procession and at the rear the banner has a symbol of a dragon. All of this is to recognize the victory of Christ over the devil.)

Once Jesus bowed and washed the dirty feet of men, but now according to Paul “All things have been put under his feet.” The crown of thorns has been removed and given to those of us who share Christ’s suffering. The towel of service has been handed over to the church. And the carpenter of Nazareth has assumed a true crown and a royal scepter. And we his people are thus more than ever moved to praise and adoration. Paul puts it like this to the Philippians:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of servant, being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:5-11)

But the ascension and exaltation of Jesus Christ can not only move us to greater praise but it can also endow our Christian discipleship with greater meaning. For now, we know that the one in whose name we serve is not simply the crucified and risen Savior, but he now is none other than the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Not only that, we also dare to believe that through the presence of the Holy Spirit, Christ himself accompanies us as we serve in his name. You see, there is a sense in which the ascension and exaltation of Christ prepares us for Pentecost. Which is coming in just ten days after the ascension.

What happened forty days after the resurrection makes possible what occurred fifty days afterwards when God through Christ poured out his Holy Spirit upon all flesh. Peter says as much in his sermon on the day of Pentecost in his sermon to the crowd saying:

“Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.”

And so, if at first it may have seemed to his followers that Jesus had gone away from his disciples through his ascension, but through the powerful descent of the spirit the risen Christ actually continues his work in the world among and through his people. He is personally present with us through the gift of the spirit.

How much more satisfying is our discipleship when we know whose we are and Whom we serve and Who serves with and beside us.. Back in 1974 when we were living and studying in Scotland, a Scottish friend took us for a ride one day around the countryside near Edinburgh. As we crossed a lovely little country bridge, she told us an intriguing and apparently true story associated with that bridge. It seems that centuries ago there was a king of Scotland who would take off his kingly robes and exchange them for the clothes of an ordinary working man and travel on horseback incognito throughout his realm. One day at this very bridge his horse became lame and a friendly old man who lived nearby came to his rescue. Quickly they became friends although the old man had no idea of the identity of the one he served. Thereafter, whenever the king went for a ride, he would stop by to visit the man. One day the old man received a royal invitation to attend a banquet given by the king for his many friends. The old man was thrilled but shocked at receiving such a royal invitation and had no idea as to why he, a commoner, should be so honored. Apparently, it was the custom back then not to remove one's hat until you actually saw the king or was in his presence. As the old man came into the banquet hall, he was surprised his friend was also in attendance and asked him if he knew when the king would arrive. And the king replied, “You will notice, my friend, that you and I are the only ones who have not removed our hats!”

Do you realize, my friends, that in serving others you and I are actually serving with and for the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords incognito? *“In as much as you have done unto the least of these, so you have done it unto me.”* If so, then perhaps the ascension and exaltation of Jesus Christ will grace our work and service with a new-found and glorious significance.

Thirdly, the ascension and exaltation of Jesus Christ can also provide us with genuine comfort as we realize that the ascended Lord, seated at the right hand of the Father now serves as our Advocate and High Priest. To gain a full appreciation of the significance of the priesthood and advocacy of Jesus Christ, you really need to study the book of Hebrews, but by way of summary let me try to explain something of what this means. As Jesus ascended to the Father and took his rightful place at his side, a position he earned through his own obedience and death, he now continues his work of salvation and he both pleads for and represents us before the Father.

Sometimes in a court of law a litigant will appear in person to represent himself. The judge of course will give him a kindly hearing, but sometimes he will advise him that he would be better served to be represented by counsel. There is after all, an old saying that any defendant who represents himself has a fool for a client! Now of course, God the Father has graciously arranged that we should have his own Son as our Advocate. Jesus through his incarnation came into this world and qualified to serve as our sympathetic counsel as he shared our humanity and identified with us in our struggles. Jesus both understands and undertakes our cause. But Jesus is also qualified to stand before the Father, unlike any priest who has gone before or after him, for he alone was sinless and obedient and willing ultimately to sacrifice himself for the right to plead our case.

Hebrews says it better than I:

“For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”(Hebrews 9:24)

“The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered up himself.” (Hebrews 7:23-27)

“Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary in the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord.” (Hebrews 8:1-2)

“Since then we have a high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the son of God, let us holdfast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Friends, would you not then agree, that the ascension and exaltation of Jesus Christ gives to sinners a solid warrant for comfort and confidence as we recognize, that Jesus, the son of God, is our advocate and High Priest?

Finally, it seems to me that the Lord's ascension and exaltation might also serve as a tremendous ground for hope if we were regard it as a pattern for our own destiny in Christ, or perhaps as a foretaste of our own inheritance as the children of God. One could argue, I think, that the ascension and exaltation of Jesus Christ is not some afterthought added to the gospel, not some literary post-script to the story of salvation, but rather the dramatic climax to the reconciling work of God.

Here we see the final reconciliation between God and humanity. Here we see revealed what God had purposed for humanity from all eternity --- fellowship and communion in glory with our Creator, Redeemer and life-long Sustainer.

In the incarnation God came down to man; but in the ascension God brings humanity to himself. Indeed, scripture teaches that the destiny of Jesus is the same as the destiny of those who are in Jesus. One of several passages that speak to this is *Romans 8:14-18*:

For all who are lead by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry "Abba! Father!" It is the spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

So as we affirm frequently in worship through one of the creeds Jesus has ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. To affirm this is to have greater incentive for praise and adoration of Jesus; to affirm this is to find new meaning in our life's work for Jesus; to affirm this is find comfort as we consider our own judgement before the Father; and to affirm this is to have good hope for ourselves and our loved ones as we consider our own eternal destiny.

Prayer: Lord God, we praise you for Jesus Christ, our crucified, risen and ascended Lord. Grant us the grace, not only to suffer with him, but eventually to reign with him in glory. Amen