

The Ascension of the Lord

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

WHAT YOU LOOKING AT?

Let us pray: Almighty God, as we prepare to hear your Word proclaimed today, we ask that you will stretch our imaginations to sense the majesty and mystery of Jesus Christ's ascension. Help us perceive how his presence in heaven can give us confidence in our ministry in his name and hope for the future. Through Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

My cell phone chirped at 7:26 Monday morning with a text message from our daughter, Natalie, in Seoul, South Korea. It was 8:26 p.m. in Seoul and she was at work at the ILE Academy where she teaches Biology, World History, Debate, and English to middle school students. Her text asked, "Are you awake?" Almost as soon as I replied, "Yes. What's up?" my phone rang. When I answered, Natalie said, "Hi, Daddy. You're on speaker phone with my class. They have a theological question for you." I was thinking to myself, "Uh-oh." Here's how our conversation played out:

Natalie: So, Jesus died on the cross and was raised up.

Me: Yes . . .

Natalie: So, did he die again and then go up to heaven?

Me: No, he died and was raised, then he ascended to heaven.

Natalie: Isn't that the same thing?

Me: What? Dying and going up to heaven and ascending to heaven?

Natalie: Yes.

Me: No, when he was raised from the dead he didn't die again. He ascended to heaven.

Natalie: Oh, OK. I think they're still confused. Gotta go. Thanks, Daddy. Love you.

[CLICK]

Maybe you're like the students in Natalie's class in Seoul, still confused about the Ascension of the Lord into heaven. Today is not the day celebrated as the Ascension of the Lord. This year that day is Thursday, May 30. Believe it or not, this coming Thursday is already forty days after Easter; which means, it is ten days before the Day of Pentecost on Sunday, June 9.

For a number of reasons, the Day of the Ascension of the Lord doesn't get much attention in most Presbyterian churches or in our culture (as opposed to Christmas and Easter). One reason is, it doesn't fall on a Sunday but always on a Thursday. Another reason is, for many people still today, celebrating the mystical Ascension of the Lord sounds like it belongs in the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox traditions. Finally, compared to the Christmas and Easter stories, there doesn't seem to be much to dramatize, although the story itself (as we heard from Acts 1 this morning) is pretty dramatic. But there is a vital connection that runs from Easter Sunday through the Day of the Ascension of the Lord on to Pentecost Sunday. According to Luke, during the forty days between Easter and his ascension, Jesus appeared to many of his followers

and taught them many things. Between the ascension and the Day of Pentecost, Jesus' disciples waited for the promised Holy Spirit.

But what does the Ascension of the Lord mean?

First, let me tell you what this sermon is not about, although these topics can be pretty interesting to talk about. This sermon is not about the physics of Jesus rising up through the air. This sermon will not try to describe what you and I might have seen if we had been there that day or if we could watch a live stream of the event itself. And this sermon is not about the difference between the world view of first century people in Palestine and post-Enlightenment people in twenty-first century North Carolina.

So then, what is this sermon about? It's about what the story of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven means for your life and mine and, especially, for the ministry of this church.

Despite our benign neglect of the Ascension of the Lord, the early church thought it was so important it was included as an indispensable part of the earliest creeds and confessions of faith.

The Nicene Creed, dating from the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. proclaims:

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,
and was made human.
He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered and was buried.
The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again with glory
to judge the living and the dead.
His kingdom will never end.

Almost every Sunday in worship we use the words of the Apostles' Creed to affirm:

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Question 47 of the Study Catechism of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) asks, “What do you affirm when you say that ‘he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father’?” The answer is, “First, that Christ has gone to be with the Father, hidden except to the eyes of faith. Second, however, that Christ is not cut off from us in the remote past, or in some place from which he cannot reach us, but is present to us here and now by grace. He reigns with divine authority, protecting us, guiding us, and interceding for us until he returns in glory.”

So, I will ask you, what do we mean when we say “The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead”? An important clue can be found in the question the two men in white robes asked the disciples, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” (Acts 1:11) Can’t you imagine Simon Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James standing slack-jawed and glassy-eyed, frozen in their tracks, staring up at the cloud above them? How do you suppose they answered the two men’s question?

Here is one person’s take on that scene:

The disciples are standing there, first looking at Jesus ascending and then staring at the clouds. They then hear a voice asking them what they are looking at.

“Uh, the sky.”

“Don’t you think you ought to get on with what Jesus told you to do?”

“Guess so.”

And that writer says, “And there is one of the great challenges the church has always faced. Adoration or action. Worship or service. Contemplation or engagement. Let’s be clear. It’s not a choice. All are a part of the life of a Christian. They feed each other. Sometimes, though, we are a bit like those disciples, standing there with our feet on the ground and our heads in the clouds. We get a little distracted. We get a little preoccupied and sidetracked. But then someone, or something, says, ‘What are you looking at?’ And that is Ascension’s moment of grace. It is a moment when we are invited to reexamine our calling and our discipleship. So it’s up to us. We can be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good, or we can about the work of expanding the realm of God. What are you looking at?”¹

Two thousand years later, that understanding of what the Ascension means brings the mysterious event directly to bear on your discipleship and mine. When Jesus was telling his disciples goodbye the night before his death, he made this astounding claim, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” (John 14:12) In two weeks, on Pentecost Sunday, we will celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, who gives us the power to do the works Jesus Christ calls us and expects us to do on this earth.

Tradition has it that St. Teresa of Avila, a 16th century Carmelite nun, mystic, reformer, and writer wrote these famous words:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.²*

That's a daunting thought, isn't it? And, yet, it's a comforting and empowering thought. We are Christ's body to do Christ's work here on earth. And if we stand with our feet rooted in the ground and our heads in the clouds, staring up at heaven, it's going to be very difficult to be about the business and work Christ calls us to do.

A contemporary poet and songwriter in the Presbyterian Church named Carolyn Gillette shares her gift of relating the truths of our faith to our everyday lives of discipleship and mission. Her Ascension Day hymn is sung to the tune of "The Day of Resurrection" (appropriately enough), so if you know that hymn, you might hum along with the words. It goes like this:

*O Christ, when you ascended, you took your rightful throne;
Your time on earth had ended – yet we weren't left alone.
You reign o'er earth and heaven; your Spirit guides our way.
Your prayers uphold your people; you lead your church each day.*

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*We look at earthly rulers and see what they command:
We note their years of power, the borders of their land.
Yet, Lord you are not bounded by things like time and space;
Your reign is never-ending, you rule in every place.*

*We're tempted, Lord, to leave you in stories nicely told;
Sometimes we don't believe you and say your ways are old.
Sometimes we feel so lonely and live in doubt and fear –
But your ascension means, Lord, you're present with us here.*

*It's often quite a challenge to follow in your Way;
We're easily distracted! It's hard, Lord, to obey.
Sometimes we give you Sundays – an hour, maybe two –
But your ascension means, Lord, all life belongs to you.*

*One day, O Lord, we'll know you, as we are fully known;
One day this world of sinners will bow before your throne.
One day, God's whole creation will sing and praise your name;
On earth as now in heaven, we'll celebrate your reign.*

The Ascension of our Lord helps us look back and claim the promise of Easter Sunday. It also helps us look ahead and claim the gifts of God's Holy Spirit. As one writer has put it so well, "For us in the church, Ascension Sunday can be a time when we remind ourselves of the important work to which we have been called. Christ's work is now our work. Without the Spirit's empowering presence, our work cannot be faithfully offered. Ascension Sunday, then, connects us to Pentecost and the gifts for ministry that the Spirit provides."³

Perhaps you have noticed in the monthly newsletter, in the digest of the actions of the session, it is always noted that "the session conducted the meeting as a worship service." A very important part of each meeting is our time for Bible study and discussion. This past Tuesday night I read the story of Pentecost from Acts 2:1-11 and Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. Then we discussed a most interesting article by Rev. Joan Gray, who was moderator of the 217th General Assembly from 2006 – 2008. She will be the preacher and keynote speaker at the East Community Gathering of our presbytery on June 15. Her article generated lots of good discussion among the members of the session. Its title is "The God-Powered Church. Rev. Gray begins her essay with these words: "The Church of Jesus Christ was created from the beginning to be God-powered. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, who were then empowered to be God's hands and feet and mouths to the world. What about our churches today? Where does our power come from? Below are some characteristics of God-powered churches. Read them prayerfully and think about how you see your church exhibiting these characteristics."

As I read through the list of characteristics of a God-powered church, think about our congregation. As the elders and I discussed Tuesday night, which of the characteristics are strengths of our church? Are there areas where you see room for improvement? I think this is a good way to ask ourselves, "What are you looking at?"

God-powered churches experience church as a divine-human partnership. This is the way Jesus intended the church, his body, to operate. In this partnership what we do is important. What God does is essential. God's will for us unfolds as we are drawn into this partnership.

God-powered churches make nurturing relationship with God a top priority. All deep relationships involve paying attention to the other. Our commitment to this God-relationship requires that we invest ourselves in practices, postures, habits, etc., that build the relationship.

God-powered churches are equipped by the Holy Spirit. We are not capable of being the Body of Christ for the world without the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. With the Spirit, all things are possible.

God-powered churches live by prayer. Prayer gives the Holy Spirit “place and space” to work in our lives. We will never fully understand prayer but practicing it obediently and faithfully opens the way for God to do more than we could ever ask or imagine.

God-powered churches are shaped and guided by engagement with Scripture. Engagement with God’s word is necessary to do God’s work. God-powered churches open up creative space so that people can hear God’s voice speaking personally to them through Scripture.

God-powered churches require spiritual leaders. Spiritual leaders are passionate about God and live toward the goal of having God firmly seated at the center of their lives and of their church. These leaders have a lively relationship with a God who is always doing a new thing.

God-powered churches take spiritual realities and resources seriously. In the God-powered church as people pray and act in faith, God draws the resources to do what God wants to be done. The God who calls is the God who provides.

God-powered churches live to serve. Church exists to do God’s will by the power of the Spirit out in the world as well as inside the church. God’s mission is the reason for their existence and the focus of their energies.

God-powered churches are places of transformation. Living close to Jesus through the Holy Spirit changes us. It has a transforming impact not only on individuals, but also on families, churches, communities, and the world.

God-powered churches teach and practice discernment. Decisions shape our common life, and *HOW* we decide things is important. God-powered congregations discover that coming at decisions through seeking God’s will shapes them into being more Godly in their life and mission.⁴

Wallace Presbyterian Church, what are you looking at?

Let us pray: Most High God, we are witnesses to the life of Jesus Christ: written in the Law, promised by the prophets, sung by the psalmists; given in love for the world, risen from the dust of death, lifted up in heavenly glory. Let our lives proclaim Christ’s life. Wrap us in your power and presence so that we may worship you always, continually blessing your name; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

NOTES

¹Kevin Scott Fleming, “When Christ’s work becomes our work,” April/May 2018 issue of *Presbyterians Today*. Found online at www.presbyterianmission.org.

²Teresa of Avila, “Christ Has No Body,” at www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers.com.

³Fleming.

⁴Joan Gray, “The God-Powered Church,” in *Regarding ruling elders: a monthly series for spiritual leaders*, March 15, 2019 at www.pcusa.org.