

Ascension Day
Ascension Sunday
May 16, 2010,
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Texts: Acts 1.1-11;
Psalm 47;
Ephesians 1.15-23;
Luke 24.44-53

So how did you spend Ascension Day? Did you know that this past Thursday was the day the church celebrates the Ascension of the Lord? It's not exactly the most well known or highly celebrated holiday in the church year. But you will notice that every time we celebrate the communion liturgy or recite the Apostle's creed the ascension is mentioned. This story that closes the book of Luke and opens the book of Acts may seem to us a strange story but to the early church this confession that Jesus died, that on the third day he rose again, that he is now ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God carried great significance. The season of Easter lasts forty days from the day we celebrate the resurrection to the day we celebrate ascension. To celebrate one without the other is to miss a key affirmation of our faith. But let's be clear: the significance of this text is not located in the question of where, in some literal sense, Jesus lives or how Jesus left this life. The affirmation that Jesus was lifted up and lives on high and has the seat of honor at God's right hand is the poetry of worship. Jesus who was once lifted up in humiliation and shame on a cross is now lifted up in honor and exaltation.

One way to look at the Ascension is as the conclusion to this mysterious movement of God in Christ that we celebrate at each of these holidays and seasons of the church year. We celebrate at Christmas the mystery of the incarnation, the way the Creator joins with the creation, and what it means to say that God dwells among us. Through Epiphany and Lent we seek to unravel the mystery of Jesus' life – his healing ministry and prophetic teaching and what it means to say that we are all citizens of God's realm. Holy Week we meditate on the meaning of Jesus' death and what it means to say that we live in a world that is broken and caught up in sin. Then on

Easter and throughout Eastertide we gather around the power of Jesus' resurrection and what it means to say that life triumphs over death. And on this day, as we celebrate the ascension, we affirm that this movement of God coming to dwell among us is brought full circle. We affirm that everything that Jesus came to be and do among us came from the power of God and returns now to the life of God. That's the theological significance in saying that Jesus was ascended into heaven.

The ascension is about more than just the movement of God in Christ. The ascension is a moment when Jesus shifts the disciples gaze from his life and ministry to **their** life and calling. They are captivated by him and rightfully so. But Jesus didn't come to create a cult of personality around himself. He came to open their eyes to the realm of God, to the ways of life that bring vitality and set people free, and make it possible to live the fully human lives that we were created to live. He meant to start something that would move beyond him. He meant to start something that would begin with his disciples but then makes it way out from there - to move out to the edges of the earth and then to move forward through time. In some ways, the most important movement in the ascension is the movement Jesus intends to ignite within his disciples. One writer describes the movement Jesus wants from them in this way: as a move from "passively waiting for Jesus to come and fix things in the end to actively participating in the work of the Holy Spirit now."¹

I ran across a wonderful analogy for this movement of the ascension in a piece Rowan Williams wrote a number of years ago. Imagine what it is like to wake up in the morning after you've been sleeping and it's been dark. When you first put on the light, the light itself and its brightness is all you are conscious of seeing. Gradually as your eyes adjust to the light, you are able to see the other objects in the room, until you get to the point where you aren't conscious of the light at all but turn your full attention to what it is that you can see now that the room is illuminated. Rowan Williams claims that post-resurrection accounts in the gospel are like that. The disciples are riveted by the presence of the resurrected Jesus. The sight of him was so blinding **he** was all they could see. The ascension is the

¹ David G. Forney, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 502.

moment when the light itself fades into the background as Jesus points their attention to the wider world. What Jesus becomes for them (from that moment forward) is the light by which they see as they take up the ministry that God has entrusted to them.²

Paul's prayer in Ephesians is a perfect Ascension Day prayer. "That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know God, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope to which God has called you..."³ This movement of God in Christ continues....God continues to gather together this body of Christ – this network of people who share the same hope and are filled by the same Spirit.

Seven of us from Hope Church went on the first of four retreats last weekend on what is being called a Multiracial Journey Initiative. Six congregations from Holland and Muskegon are committed to walk alongside each other for two years as we work to be faithful to God's call to be ONE – to work at unity and racial reconciliation as a central call of the gospel. Part of the design of this retreat series is this recognition that something happens when we come together. As our speaker insisted human beings are made for connection and community, he reminded us: we cannot conceive ourselves, we cannot raise ourselves, and despite this persistent impulse as adults to operate as if we are independent and self-sufficient, as we age we are brought back to this truth that we cannot do life on our own. So on the day of ascension Jesus reminds his disciples that they will receive power – power to be his witnesses. But this power will be given when the community gathered as we will celebrate together next week on Pentecost.

The power they received is the same power we touch whenever we come together to witness to the truth of Jesus Christ. I felt that power two weeks ago when Gordon and I crashed the Hope student's Be In on campus. It was this quiet gathering of students witnessing to the truth (as they see it) that Christ calls us to be in community, be in conversation, to be in the

² This idea comes from Rowan Williams, "Ascension Day" in a *Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Press, 1995).

³ Ephesians 1.17-18

body of Christ together. I felt that power as residents of our community and members of this church marched during tulip time witnessing to the truth that Christ calls us to be peacemakers. From the perspective of the world that measures success in terms of numbers and outcome neither of those gatherings was a “success.” But both of them shared this in common: those who gathered were encouraged and uplifted - you could feel yourself being filled up with the Spirit just by virtue of sharing the mantle of ministry together. This happens all over in the body of Christ as food is gathered and shared, as confessions are made and relationships restored, as burdens and struggles are shared and companionship and prayers are offered. These are the places where we are filled up and made ready to walk into the next place where God is leading. That’s the image of this text - of the Spirit of Christ filling all in all. We see this movement of God in the life of Christ coming full circle on the day of ascension.

The promise of the ascension is that God is still on the move....in you and in me and in all of creation.

God is on the move and will be until that day when all things are filled with the fullness of God.

Happy Ascension Day!

Amen.