

## *Lifted Up*

Psalm 93; Acts 1:1-11  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church  
May 24, 2020 – Ascension Sunday

The day of Jesus' ascension has always been a bit of a puzzle for me. Other parts of Jesus' story – his birth, life, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection – all seemed crucial to me and resonated deeply with me. But for some reason, I found the Ascension harder to appreciate. Now, I would affirm the ascension every time I said the Apostles' Creed, saying, "On the third day, he rose again from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right of God the Father Almighty." So I don't think I ever disbelieved in the ascension; it just didn't resonate with me. As I've thought about why that is, I think there were basically two reasons, both of which I have come to think were misunderstandings on my part.

The first reason I felt distant from the Ascension was that the story of Jesus' Ascension seemed a little too much like a scene from a superhero movie, where Superman or someone else, probably wearing some brightly-colored cape, rose off the ground and soared off into the skies. While I enjoy a good Superman movie as much as anyone, it seemed a little strange as part of the story about Jesus, who was so down-to-earth: he walked the dusty streets of Galilee, ate with outcasts and cared so deeply about people who were sick and hungry. *The Ascension seemed to make him remote*, which didn't fit with the Jesus I adored.

The second reason, somewhat related to the first, was that the Ascension kind of felt like Jesus was leaving us. During Holy Week, the disciples felt bereft on the day of Jesus' crucifixion, as their Lord was killed. Then he was raised from the dead, and they had him back! But then in the ascension, it seemed like he left them again to deal with all their problems. *The ascension seemed to take Jesus away from the difficulties of our lives.*

Pastor Annamarie was the person who turned my thinking around about the Ascension. Annamarie insisted on the importance of this liturgical day; she said that we needed to celebrate it at Lewinsville, and she pointed us to the fact that our forebear John Calvin emphasized the importance of the ascension. So, I want to give a big shout-out to Pastor Annamarie for lifting this day up and pointing us in the right direction.

What the Ascension means to tell us is that Jesus is not less present to us because he has ascended into heaven, but that he is actually *more present*. This was John Calvin's big point. Calvin wrote that Jesus "removed his bodily presence from our sight, not so as to leave without help believers who still have to live on earth, but in order to rule the world with a power *even more present* than before. His promise to be

with us to the end of the age has been fulfilled by his ascension, for as by it his body was lifted above all the heavens, so its power and effectiveness reach far beyond all bounds of heaven and earth.”<sup>1</sup> Before his ascension into heaven, Jesus’ presence was restricted by the limitations of space and time. But because the Bible understands heaven to be the realm where God’s will is done, where “a thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone,” the same limitations of time and space do not apply. Because of his ascension into heaven, where God’s will is already complete, Jesus can be present to all of his people everywhere, not just in one place in ancient Palestine. The Anglican bishop and New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright (whose books I would strongly encourage you to get to know, if you don’t already) says much the same thing: “Jesus has been exalted to heaven ... so that he can be present to the whole earth simultaneously.”<sup>2</sup> The ascension does not make Jesus remote from us, as I first thought; it actually makes him more present to us, through the power of the Holy Spirit, which the text says will be poured out on Pentecost, which we will celebrate next week.

My second concern somehow felt even more acute, because it felt like, in the Ascension, Jesus, our good shepherd, was leaving us. Which would mean that we’re left on our own to deal with our griefs and losses and difficulties. This concern takes on a particular poignancy in our current time, where our losses and griefs can feel like they are piling up around us. COVID-19 has touched the lives of people we love, and for some, it has touched them directly; the congregation my wife serves in Washington, DC, suffered four deaths in their church community this past week from COVID-19. Economic and job losses, and unemployment numbers are high. Graduations and proms and sports seasons have been canceled. There is a deep polarization about how best to respond to all of these things. The griefs that we are carrying as people and as a world are really large. What does the Ascension mean for us in the midst of so much grief?

I asked my wife this question this past week. What does the Ascension mean for us when the griefs and the sheer exhaustion of quarantine are so great? Laura said that she thinks a big part of it is that it means that Jesus carries our griefs and our fears and our exhaustion right into the heart of heaven. Jesus is not trying to get away from us in his Ascension; Jesus, who walks with us and sits with us in our fatigue and our fear, takes those griefs right into the heart of God. The one who sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty does not sit there as some aloof ruler who is glad to be away from the pain of his people. He sits there as the one who holds all of the sins and griefs of the world, holding them in his mercy, praying for us, praying with us, holding it all in the healing light of God.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (United Kingdom: Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 253, cited in <https://schreibersscribbles.wordpress.com/2018/05/18/even-more-present-than-before-john-calvin-on-the-ascension-of-christ/>.

<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright sermon, “On Earth As It Is In Heaven,” <https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/03/30/on-earth-as-in-heaven/>

And finally, you will notice that the text from Acts 1 about the Ascension is not only about Jesus. It is also about you and me. To his followers, who are worried about many things, who long for their troubles with the Roman Empire to be taken away, who want their lives restored to the way they were, he says, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and *you will be my witnesses*, in Jerusalem – where you are right now – and to the ends of the earth."

So, not only does the day of Ascension teach us that Jesus is present with us wherever we are; and not only does the day of Ascension teach us that our troubles and griefs have been taken right into the heart of heaven; the day of Ascension summons us to embody the news, to bear witness to the news, about Jesus' love and presence wherever we are, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves, to embody that good news with those who are hurting around us, responding to their needs in the sure awareness that Jesus is with them, too. On this Ascension Sunday, to God and to God alone, be all the glory, honor, and power. Amen.