

Sermon – May 24, 2020
“Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:1-11

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. May they be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Amen

Christ is Risen! Type in those responses!

Good morning to everyone who is joining us live or watching on a recorded video feed. Let me take a moment and thank the Rev Dr. Charles Ledlum-Bates for providing our service last week. I hope that you were able to join with him as he proclaimed the word. I also want to thank this morning’s worship team for coming and being with us and leading us in worship. And of course, thanks to all of those “behind the scenes” workers who make this live stream possible.

Did any of us hold a celebration on Thursday, May 21st? Were there parties in our homes? Did we exchange presents with each other? Last Thursday was one of the most significant days on the Church’s historic calendar, a day on par with Easter and Christmas. Did we notice? In this time of social distancing, did we have a parade with signs that celebrated the historic events that took place on the fortieth day after the resurrection of our Lord? What is this significant event you ask? Thursday marked the fortieth day after Easter. It is the day that Jesus ascended into heaven. It is a day of great significance in the life of the church, yet these days we let it go by mostly unnoticed. Today is Ascension Sunday. Today is the day we remember that after forty days of appearing to his followers and speaking to them about the kingdom of God, Jesus ascended into heaven before their eyes. These disciples were witnesses to Jesus’ ascension. This morning I would like to spend a few moments and join with the disciples in their witness of Jesus’s ascension into heaven with the intent of convincing us that the ascension is an event in our lives that we should celebrate as it has significant implications for each of us. The question we need to answer this morning is, “What does Jesus’ ascension mean for each of us?”

In my childhood years growing up in West Virginia, one of the things I liked to do on a summer afternoon and evening was to watch the thunderheads grow in the sky. In the mountains, you can see great distances and you could watch these clouds billowing up and growing as the storms grew. I found the sight beautiful and intriguing. The contrast of the white

cloud against the blue sky that constantly changed and morphed every moment as I watched was something I enjoyed on a summer day. That memory, probably triggered by the mention of a cloud, is a connection point for me into this morning's scripture. Let's start working to answer our question of "what does Jesus' ascension mean for us?" by looking at the scripture together and seeing what we discover that will connect us to the Lord's ascension to heaven.

As we begin, let me point out that in Luke's writings, the ascension account appears twice, once at the end of Luke's Gospel and a second time at the beginning of Acts. The accounts are not the same, and together they provide us with key insights into this pivotal event in Jesus' life. This morning we heard the account from Luke's Gospel read, but I will also be pulling key insights from his account of the ascension found in Acts 1:1-11. The duplication of this event in Luke's writings mark it as a key moment both for the close of his Gospel and for the birth of the church and the post-resurrection actions of Jesus' Spirit-filled disciples.

Jesus has appeared to his disciples and is speaking with them again. This is the fortieth day since Jesus' resurrection. Over these past forty days of Easter, at least on the Sundays, we have looked at the scripture accounts of the appearances the Gospel writers shared with us. In this last appearance, Jesus reminds the disciples again of his words given to them during their time with him. I find it astonishing that in this text, Jesus, who is the living Word of God, God in the flesh, the Word made flesh, reminds the disciples, and us, again, that he has spoken words to them. They are words that are alive and powerful, words that change us if we will allow them to enter into our hearts and dwell there. They are words that God has given to us through His only son that we might believe and have eternal life. When Jesus is speaking during this appearance, he also points the disciples to the scriptures of the Old Testament. Jesus tells the disciples he has fulfilled everything written about him in all of the scriptures. Notice that Luke includes the law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms when he defines the scriptures that Jesus fulfills. Luke pulls heavily from the Psalms as he writes about Jesus, and this expression is a writing technique he uses when he wants his readers to realize that he is including all of scripture. Jesus has reminded us that he fulfills all of these writings found in scripture about the Messiah. He is telling us that the revelation is completed in him. The fulfillment Jesus speaks to is not to the coming of a mighty ruler to restore Israel, but to the suffering, death, and resurrection that are revealed as the fulfillment of the scriptures.

In Acts, the disciples will ask Jesus if this is the time for the restoration of Israel. It is as if they have not yet grasped this idea of fulfillment. They still seem to be clinging to a hope that

Jesus will restore the nation of Israel once again and include them as part of its leadership. Jesus reminds the disciples that they are witnesses to these things that happened to him, his suffering, his death, his resurrection, and that now something new is about to take place, some last key part of the fulfillment of the scriptures, something that has not yet entered into his disciples' minds. They are still struggling with what it means for Jesus to fulfill the scriptures. They are still struggling with a resurrected Jesus. These are struggles we also encounter as we seek to understand what it means for Jesus to fulfill all that is written about the Messiah in the scriptures.

Notice that Jesus includes in his discussion of fulfillment of the scriptures repentance and forgiveness of sins being proclaimed in his name to all nations, starting from Jerusalem. Part of the fulfillment of the scriptures is the idea that all nations, all people of the world, are to have repentance and forgiveness of sin proclaimed to them. I think at the moment that Jesus shares this part of fulfillment with his disciples, they are thinking, "Okay, and we will go with you as you go, and help you do that. We will follow you on this new path." In Acts, what Jesus is telling the disciples is made clearer by Luke. There, Jesus tells his disciples that they will be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The disciples will not go with Jesus as he goes out. Instead, Jesus will be present with them as they go out to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sin. Jesus does not send them out alone; he tells them to stay in Jerusalem until they are clothed with power from on high. There is a promise from Jesus given in this last appearance at the end of the forty days of post-resurrection appearances. There is a promise of a coming power from on high. Think about that a minute. What is it like to be clothed with power from on high? Now I can't see you this morning on the live stream. And I have to be honest, I can't help but wonder how many of you watching are clothed with fuzzy bunny slippers, holding coffee cups, and dressed comfortably as you listen. When we come to church, we tend to clothe ourselves in our Sunday best, but imagine if there is something more that Jesus wants to clothe us with, power from on high. In Acts, Luke will call this the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is the power that the disciples are to wait in Jerusalem for Jesus to send. This is the power we are to wait for, hunger for, and ask Jesus to send to us, so that we like these disciples can be clothed with the Holy Spirit and go out in the power of God to be witnesses to all of the earth.

Jesus speaks these words to his followers and then leads them out of Jerusalem as far as Bethany. There he lifts up his hands, blesses them, and, while he is doing that, he withdraws from them and is carried up into heaven. In Acts, we are told that the disciples watch him go and

a cloud takes him out of their sight and they stand there gazing up toward heaven. The cloud that obscures his watchers' view of Jesus but which they continue to look upon is the shekinah glory of God. This is the cloud that was with the Hebrews in the wilderness. This is the cloud that filled the tabernacle as the Hebrews journeyed to the promised land. This is the cloud that once filled the temple in Jerusalem with the presence of God. And this is the cloud that the witnesses to Jesus' transfiguration entered. This time, the cloud, the shekinah glory of God, obscures the disciple's view of Jesus as he is taken up into heaven and into the Glory of God. In Luke's Gospel, this moment marks the end of the resurrection appearances and the end of his Gospel. Luke leaves the joyful disciples in the temple in great joy awaiting their clothing with the promised Holy Spirit, the power from God.

In Acts, Luke uses this same moment to document that two angels appear to the cloud-gazing disciples. The angels ask them, "Why are you standing there looking at the cloud? Jesus who has been taken up from you to heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." They are basically telling the disciples to get going, get ready to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and to be going out into the world to be witnesses for Jesus Christ.

The question that this morning's scripture leads us to is, "What does the ascension mean for us?" And let me break that question into two parts, "What are we to do in light of the ascension?" and "What does it mean for us that Jesus is in heaven?" Now these are questions we really need to grab hold of and come before the Lord seeking answers until we are rock solid in what the ascension means for our lives. Let me lay out some of the key implications. First, we, as the body of Christ here in this place, receive the same commission that Jesus gave to his disciples. We are to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations, starting from the place we are in, right here, right now. If there is one thing that the Covid-19 virus response has done for this church, it would be that it has sent it out. You are not in this building this morning. I can see that the pews are mostly empty. You are out in the world, in your homes, among your neighbors, waiting. I think what we are waiting for is a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a baptism of the Holy Spirit. So, the first thing we are to do in light of the ascension is to pray to be clothed with the Holy Spirit. We are to wait for that clothing in prayer, and to pray for clothing in joy and expectation. Jesus is in heaven and he has told us he will send the Holy Spirit. Prepare your hearts, ask for, cry out for, anticipate the coming of the Holy Spirit into your life, either for the first time or more fully than we have ever experienced the Holy Spirit before. Keep in mind we are not praying for the Holy Spirit to be our comforter in our homes or

wherever we are, but we are praying for the Power from on high that enables us to go out to into all of the world starting right here right now and to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. This is about the body of Christ, the church filled with the Power of God, going out in the world sharing the steadfast love of the Lord with those who have no idea that they can repent, be forgiven, and be reconciled to God for eternity. It is us, the body of Christ, in the Power of God being the church sent out into the world. So first, we, in great joy, are to begin to pray that Jesus will send the Holy Spirit on us and wake us up in the Power of God to do what the church is supposed to be doing. Next Sunday we will celebrate Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, but what we really need to be hungering for is to be celebrating the Holy Spirit baptism of every member of this church and their joyful going out to all people in this place and other places to share Jesus Christ. That is step one. Are we ready? Then start praying and keep praying until we are all clothed with the Holy Spirit, the Power of the living God. And when the Holy Spirit comes, we are to move! So that answers the first part of the question we are seeking to answer this morning. Because of Jesus' ascension into heaven, we are to be praying for the Holy Spirit to come and enable us to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sin.

Now let's look at the second part of our question, "What are the implications for us that Jesus has ascended to heaven?" That Jesus is in heaven, that the disciples witnessed him going to heaven, has great implications for us. First, it means that Jesus in his resurrected body is in the presence of a Holy God. In Hebrews 9:24 we find, "For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf." This means that Christ is reunited with the Father in heaven and he is there for us, on our behalf. We have an advocate in heaven with God. Second, Jesus's ascension into heaven means that Jesus now possesses all divine power, the power of a Holy God. Jesus set aside this power and took on flesh, but by ascending to heaven he returns to his place there at the right hand of God. In Psalm 110:1 we find, "THE LORD says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'" After his ascension, we find Jesus again at the position of power in heaven, at God's right hand. This gives him the power to bring about redemption. What he had set aside he now has taken up again, and he has at his command the fullness of the power of a Holy God, and he can use that power on our behalf. Third, Jesus is present with God in heaven to intercede on our behalf and on behalf of all believers. In Romans 8:34 we find, "Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us." Jesus is at God's right hand as our

intercessor. At the right hand of God sits one who cries out on our behalf to the Father. And finally, we find Jesus filling all things. In Ephesians 4:10, "He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things." Christ is permeating all things. One of my seminary professors summarized the first three implications of ascension as, "Holy of Holy Presence, right hand of God Power, standing in the gap Posture." That might be worth writing on our bathroom mirrors so that we can be reminded of it each morning and evening. Because Jesus has ascended into heaven, he has a Holy of Holy Presence, Right hand of God Power, and a Standing in the Gap Posture.

As we read that short statement, we need to understand what it means for us as believers in Christ. As believers, we are in Christ. Christ is working in us through the Holy Spirit to conform us to his image. As we grow into that image, we also begin to have a Holy of Holy presence, the Power that comes from the right hand of God position, and a standing in the gap posture. Think about it this way; we as the body of Christ, those remade into his image, now, because of what the ascension into heaven means for Jesus, benefit from a more effective presence of Christ with us. And because Christ is more effectively present with us, we can be those who have these attributes enabling us as we boldly go forth clothed in the Holy Spirit to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sin to all of the nations. In my Ascension Day parade, there would be signs on the cars driving by and being held up through the open windows by those in the cars. The signs would read, "Holy of Holy presence," "Right hand of God Power," "Standing in the Gap for you," "Christ is in all things!" "Pray for Holy Spirit Baptism," "Go in the Power," and "To all the World."

Pray with me: Jesus, forgive us when we look to you to restore Israel in this time and place. Lord, hear our prayer for the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. Lord, open our hearts to wait in joy and great expectation for the coming of the Holy Spirit, and when He comes, to boldly go to all of the world in your power starting right here in this place and continuing to all the places you will lead us. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Be poured out on all of your people. Amen