

All This and Heaven, Too!

Ascension Day Sunday

Text: Luke, 24:51; Romans 8:31-39

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. Luke 24:51

If God is for us, who is against us? ...Christ Jesus...is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us....nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:31-39 (Selected)

This is Ascension Sunday. Some of you may have missed our service on Thursday evening. (Laughter) Well, I used to have to go to Ascension Day service. Someone asked me, “Do you have a service in your congregation on Ascension Day?” I said, “No. I love my wife, but to just preach to her alone wouldn’t turn me on.” (Laughter) You probably did miss the Ascension Day service, so we are going to do it today. We call it Ascension Sunday now, but Thursday was the 40th day after Easter. According to the way that Luke tells the story of Jesus there was resurrection on Easter morning, and then there was a period of time - 40 days – but that’s a period of time in biblical terminology, a period of time in which the risen one from the presence of God made an appearance to his disciples. Then, Luke tells us, those appearances ceased. He puts it on a timeline of 40 days, and then 10 days to Pentecost and the pouring out of the Spirit of God. So we celebrate Ascension Day in order to remember that the crucified one was exalted into the presence of God; that Jesus who was crucified was not only raised from the dead but was received into the presence of God, enthroned and empowered; that Jesus is in heaven with God for us on our behalf.

According to the way that Luke tells the story, we have Jesus appearing to his disciples, but that appearance was the appearance of the resurrected one. Jesus didn’t have an address. He didn’t live someplace during that period of time. He always came from God. So the appearances of Jesus were the verification of the reality of his living presence with his disciples.

The Christian Year is just about over. We are coming to the end of another cycle. But it is interesting that the story of Jesus as we celebrate it in the Christian Year is not a story that begins with the birth of Jesus. Rather the season of the

Christian Year begins with Advent when we celebrate the fact that God will bring all things to completion. We celebrate our Christian hope in the first season of the year, and then we move to Christmas and the birth, and the life, and the death, and the resurrection of Jesus. In other words, the story of Jesus is the ground of our hope, and the fact that Jesus is exalted in the presence of God is the deep assurance with which we live.

I want to say just a couple of things very briefly to you this morning. The first may seem obvious and unnecessary to say and yet I am going to say it: the exalted one is none other than the one who was crucified. It is Jesus who died who is in the presence of God. The exaltation of Jesus is the consequence of the life that Jesus lived – the way that he walked, the faith in which he believed. Paul tells us in his great hymn about Christ in Philippians 2 that he “humbled himself.” Paul says, quoting a hymn of the time that, Jesus humbled himself, took on the form of a servant, became obedient unto death, even death on the cross whereby, wherefore, God has highly exalted him and given him a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God.” The one who is exalted is the one who was crucified.

I say that because sometimes I hear Christians talk as though it is possible in our present human experience to know victory and triumph. I remember a chorus from when I was a kid, “Victory in Jesus.” Sometimes I hear in some parts of the church a kind of triumphalistic attitude. Do you know that word? I looked it up in the dictionary. It’s not there! (Laughter) But it’s a word anyway. Triumphalism or a triumphalistic attitude is a kind of arrogant, superiority whereby we figure that we are on the winning team. You know - come to Jesus and be a winner. Join the church and be a part of the Christian movement, be “Number One.” It’s not true. Come to Jesus, and to the degree that you are faithful to the Way of Jesus, you might be a loser. Was Jesus a winner or loser? You say, “Well, he was a winner.” You know, “Crown him with many crowns. The lamb upon his throne.”

I want to remind you on Ascension Sunday, that Jesus was a winner only because he was willing to be a loser. Jesus was a servant. Jesus went the way of suffering. He was a man of sorrow, despised and rejected. Jesus slugged it out and the world said ‘No’ to him. The world put him to death. And to the extent that the Christian Church today would follow the way of Jesus, I don’t think it would be any different.

Young people, as you make your decisions, crucial decisions in your life right now, think long, decide carefully. It is so easy to just get caught up in the stream of things, unthinkingly making decisions, trying to be “Number One,” trying to capture the world. Suddenly you get yourself locked into a way of life and a structure of society. Then you get to be a doddering old fool like me and suddenly you say, “How can I get unlocked from all of this and really be what Jesus wants me to be?”

Jesus was not a winner. Jesus was faithful to God. Jesus did all that he believed that God called him to be, and it got him a cross. We cannot leap over our present experience and grab that crown from Jesus and reign with him now. We are called to serve with him now, and if need be to suffer as he suffered. And if need be to go through crucifixion as he went through crucifixion because it is God who exalts the one who is willing to obey and follow - even to death. No cross. No crown. Don't believe those superficial siren calls that say, "Come to Jesus and be a winner." Well, that's a downer. Want to reconsider? (Laughter)

Is that all I have to say? No. I want to say this too, that in the meantime when you are slugging it out making the decisions that would honor Jesus and go the way of Jesus, you are not alone. Paul explained his understanding of the Christian faith in the letter to the Roman Church as fully as anywhere. Then when he concludes his exposition he says, "What shall we say to all these things?" That's his question. "What shall we say to all these things?" He concludes, "If God is for us who can be against us?" There's a promise for your confirmation and for us all. "If God be for you, who could be against you?" Then he summarizes all of the events we have just celebrated, for he says, "It is Christ who died, yea that was risen again, that is at the right hand of God who is praying for us." Jesus in heaven, in the presence of God praying for us. Cheering you on. Encouraging you. Your cheerleader in heaven - one who has gone before you, who has gone through the cross, received the crown and is there in the presence of God and knows your name, and cares, and is with you and says to you what he knew so fully, *"If God is with you, who could be against you?"*

Oh, you say, "But there's a lot of things that could go wrong." Paul knew that too. He says, "Famine, nakedness, persecution, sword, peril." Well, what would be your list today? What things go wrong in our lives? Paul says, "It doesn't matter." Give the list however you want to construct it. Then he says, "Those things will never separate us from the love of Christ. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us," but conquerors in the conflict and able to stand in the midst of the storm, able to stand against all of the pressures that would bring us in another way.

You are not alone. God is for you. Jesus is praying for you. "There's nothing that will ever separate you from the love of God." That's the way he concludes this chapter in some of the most beautiful lines that have ever been penned. He says,

"Neither life nor death, nor principalities nor powers, nor things in the heights nor the depths, angels, things present, things to come, nothing in all creation will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

You have all you need here and now to follow the way of Jesus in spite of the cost, in full light of the cross. But even that is not all I can say, because the exaltation of Jesus is a sign to us that this is not all there is. There is all of this, and heaven too.

I was really moved last week at how deeply so many of *you* were moved at the song of Eric Clapton, "Tears in Heaven." It reminded me that down beneath our education and our sophistication and our kind of natural reserve for one another the hearts of us all are haunted by heaven. The longing of us all deep down is to know that this is not all that there is. Jesus is in the presence of God, through the cross, receiving the crown. We can't claim the crown today. Ours is still the way of the cross, but beyond that we have one waiting for us, preparing a place for us.

The promise of Jesus in heaven is the promise of heaven for those that follow Jesus. Jesus with us here. We with Jesus there. All of this. All of this and heaven too! Thank God.