

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 2, 2019
Feast of the Ascension
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 110:1-5
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:49-53

Today we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus, one of the four principal feasts of the Church Year.

The Ascension has often caused problems for some, primarily because they try to see the event through the lens of Enlightenment rationalism rather than a first century biblical lens.

In the first century, folks held a “three storied” view of the universe: hell down below, earth on the main floor, and heaven “up there.”

Modern persons know that our discoveries about space make this ancient worldview difficult, but they wrongly conclude from that the Ascension did not happen, or if it did, it amounted to Jesus going “up, up and away” to a distant and irrelevant place.

But from the view of the New Testament, Jesus has gone to heaven so as to direct operations *more fully here on earth*. That is why we pray the words, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven*.” Jesus has not gone up, up, and away, but rather *has entered more deeply into our world*. He has gone to a dimension that transcends but impinges upon our universe.

And what exactly is that dimension? Well, the New Testament book of Hebrews tells us. The book of Hebrews provides the most extended commentary on Jesus' ascension in the New Testament. In some lectionaries, the epistle lesson for today is taken from Hebrews, with good reason.

Time doesn't permit us to quote at length, but in Hebrews 9-10 the writer describes how the earthly temple and its sacrifices were a "copy" of the heavenly temple. Under the Old Covenant, the priests offered sacrifices daily in the temple, and once a year the High Priest would take the blood from the sacrificial lambs and move into the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary. There, on the Day of Atonement, he would offer sacrifice for the sins of the people.

But as the mediator of a New Covenant, Christ himself is the High Priest. And Christ enters not the *earthly* temple, but the *heavenly* temple. The writer of Hebrews says it this way:

*But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tabernacle (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an **eternal redemption**.* (Heb. 9:11-12)

And just a few verses later, the writer continues:

For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the Holy Place yearly with blood not his own; for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. (Heb. 9:24-26)

Now we are starting to get at the heart of Jesus' ascension. In his ascension to heaven, Jesus isn't merely returning to the Father in order to sit at the Father's right hand and assume his royal throne. In his ascension into heaven, Jesus enters the heavenly sanctuary or temple not made with hands **in order to offer the sacrifice of himself once for all time!**

Now we are getting to the heart of the matter. It is easy for most of us to think that Jesus' earthly sacrifice that began in the upper room on Holy Thursday, and climaxed on the Cross on Good Friday, was the end of it.

But that is not the end of it. Now we see how the Jesus' ascension brings to further completion what occurred during Holy Week. Jesus' saving work did not end with the empty tomb or his appearances to the disciples over 40 days. Jesus' saving work has a *liturgical* consummation. He is the great High Priest, where he still has to ascend to the heavenly Jerusalem, there to celebrate the feast in the true Holy of Holies.

This is precisely what the writer of Hebrews is telling us. With Jesus' ascension, Jesus brings his glorified and resurrected body into the *heavenly temple*, **where he now offers himself as a sacrifice to the Father, not in time, but in eternity. Not on earth, but in heaven.** It is not Jesus' resurrection, but his ascension, that is the climax of the Paschal Mystery.

Return with me to Holy Week. During Holy Week, on earth, Jesus fulfilled the feast of the Passover by showing himself to be *the very Passover Lamb, slain from the foundation of the world*. As the New Covenant Passover Lamb, Jesus fulfilled the feast of Passover.

But now with his ascension to heaven, the writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus also fulfills the Old Covenant *Day of Atonement*. For whereas the Old Covenant High Priest would enter the earthly temple into the Holy of Holies, now Jesus has entered the *heavenly* temple, carrying not the blood of bulls and goats but his very own blood. And unlike the Old Covenant Priest, Jesus' sacrifice in the heavenly temple *is needed only once*.

And from the heavenly temple, Jesus now exercises his High Priestly ministry continually. The writer of Hebrews says so, when he says:

...he [Jesus] holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Heb. 7:24-25)

In his ascension, Jesus takes his historical sacrifice, offered once in *history*, into *eternity*, into the heavenly sanctuary.

It might be easy to think that Jesus' High Priestly ministry was finished on Calvary. But that would be a mistake. For the offering of himself that occurred in history, at Calvary outside of Jerusalem, has become a perpetual and eternal offering through his entry into the *heavenly* temple. Christ now permanently

exercises his priesthood from the *heavenly* temple, taking his sacrifice for us 2,000 years ago in a far-off place and making it eternally *present*.

Now, come with me to our reading from Acts and our Gospel lesson from Luke. Luke tells us that just before Jesus ascends, he lifts up his hands and “blesses” the disciples. As he is blessing them, he is carried up into heaven.

This act of blessing is very significant. Blessing was something familiar to every first century Jewish man and woman. Each day at 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., as commanded in the Law, the Jewish priests celebrated what was known as the *tamid*, or “perpetual offering.” (Ex. 29:38-41)

One group of priests placed a lamb, a cake of bread, and wine on the altar as another groups of priests led the people in reciting the Ten Commandments and the *Shema*. They would then sing the Psalm designated for that day of the week.

The *tamid* concluded with the priests gathering on the steps of the Holy Place (the Holy of Holies), extending their arms out toward the people and invoking the blessing of the Lord originally entrusted to Moses and Aaron:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. [Numbers 6:24-26]

When the apostles see Jesus ascend into heaven *while in the very act of blessing them*, they understand that he is “climbing the steps” of the true Holy of Holies, the heavenly temple. Only one Jewish priest was allowed to enter the Holy

Place at the time of the *tamid*, to burn incense before God's earthly throne room, the Holy of Holies. The only person who could enter that room was the high priest, and he did so only once a year on the Feast of *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement.

When the apostles see Jesus disappear into a "cloud" (Acts 1:9), the Old Testament symbol of God's presence (Ex. 13:31-32, 24:16-18; Numbers 9:15-23), they understand that Jesus has now entered into God's *heavenly* throne room, the reality to which the Temple and the earthly Holy of Holies pointed. Jesus continues to offer himself to the Father, in his glorified *humanity*, just as he has from all eternity in his divinity.

Hebrews and Revelation portray Jesus, the Lamb of God, making the true perpetual offering to the Father – *himself* – through the wounds of his passion (Heb. 7:25; 9:24; Rev. 5:6-14). Jesus draws all of heaven, the angels and saints, into this great heavenly liturgy, causing them to offer themselves through, with, and in him (Rev. 4:6-5:14).

It is this same liturgy that breaks forth to earth, upon our altars, in the Eucharist. The bread and wine we offer are the fulfillment of Israel's *tamid*, and we receive Christ in the Eucharistic communion, the same Christ who bodily entered into the glory of the Father.

It is the Ascension that makes all of this a reality. No wonder it is one of the four great feasts of the Church Year.

As we come to the Table, let's pause for a moment to try to summarize what happens every time we gather here in this place.

At his ascension, Jesus did not merely return to heaven to sit at the Father's right hand and twiddle his thumbs until the Father says it's time to bring history to an end. At his ascension, Jesus entered into the heavenly temple, bringing his resurrected and glorified body that he offered up *in history* and offering it up in *eternity* – so that what happened on Calvary is as present as right now.

And in our gathering here we are taken up to that ascended realm, to that dimension where the heavenly liturgy is ongoing and stands outside of time, where Jesus is still mediating a New Covenant, feeding his people with his Body and Blood and constantly interceding for them as their great High Priest.

From now on, if anyone ever says to you: “Church is boring, I don't get anything out of it,” or if you are ever tempted to say that to yourself, please do me this one favor: remember this sermon. Remember the reality to which this sermon points. And then get yourself to church.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.