

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
May 8, 2016  
Ascension Sunday  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

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

Today we celebrate one of the four great feasts of the Christian year as we commemorate the Ascension of Jesus. There are many places in the New Testament where Jesus' ascension is not really separated from his resurrection, and in the early church the celebration of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension was an integrated event. (Cf. Rom. 1:4; 10:6; Phil. 2:9; Eph. 4:8-10; I Pet. 3:22; Heb. 4:14; 7:26; esp. I Tim. 3:16)

But in Luke's Gospel there is a tendency to separate the ascension from the resurrection, to make it a more distinct occurrence. Thus, the historical development of Ascension Day as a separate feast day in the church year might simply be a liturgical expression of a tendency we see early on in the New Testament itself, beginning with Luke.

In any event, the Ascension has gotten short shrift in recent years among many, due in part to criticism from those whose scientific world-view differs from the world-view of those in the first century. That ancient world view was a "three

storied” view of the universe: hell down below, earth on the main floor, and heaven “up there.”

Modern persons know that with our exploration of space we have rendered that old way of seeing things obsolete. But they then conclude, wrongly I think, that the Ascension could not have happened.

They are incorrect because in the final analysis the Ascension is not about where Jesus went *spatially*. The Ascension is about the fact that God finishes what he starts. And it is a foretaste of our own resurrection and our reign with Christ in glory.

Now, in Luke’s account of the Ascension here in Acts, the Ascension serves to set the stage for the birth and growth of the Church. It prepares us for the fact that a new chapter is about to begin. In this new chapter, Jesus will be present with the disciples in a *different* way.

Notice how Luke describes what is going to happen from Acts 1. First, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will come in power. Second, the disciples will be witnesses to the Easter faith (to Jesus’ resurrection). What is more, their testimony will spread throughout all the world, beginning first in Jerusalem.

And for all this to happen, Jesus must assume his rightful place at the Father’s right hand, taking his place of supreme authority over all things (as Paul reminds the Ephesians).

The Ascension, then, is a great “bridge” connecting Easter and Pentecost. It signals a climactic conclusion to God’s saving work, and shows us the promise that in his *absence*, Jesus is still very much *present* with us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I discovered an ancient sermon this week that helped me think about this in a new way. My attitude has always been that the disciples of Jesus had it better than me, because they got to be with Jesus *in person*. My logic has been that it’s much easier to believe in something that you can *see*, and so the disciples had a big advantage over all of us.

But Saint Leo the Great helped me to reconsider this. Listen to what he says:

*At Easter, beloved brethren, it was the Lord’s resurrection which was the cause of our joy; our present rejoicing is on account of his ascension into heaven. With all due solemnity we are commemorating that day on which our poor human nature was carried up, in Christ, above all the hosts of heaven, above all the ranks of angels, beyond the highest heavenly powers to the very throne of God the Father. It is upon this ordered structure of divine acts that we have been firmly established, so that the grace of God may show itself still more marvelous when, in spite of the withdrawal from men’s sight of everything that is rightly felt to command their reverence, faith does not fail, hope is not shaken, charity does not grow cold.*

*For such is the power of great minds, such the light of truly believing souls, that they put unhesitating faith in what is not seen with the bodily eye; they fix their desires on what is beyond sight. Such fidelity could never be born in our hearts, nor could anyone be justified by faith, if our salvation lay only in what was visible.*

St. Leo may be onto something here. He argues that God's grace operates "more marvelously" through Jesus' ascension because it produces a faith that does not fail, hope that is not shaken, and love that does not grow cold.

He also argues that it is a feature of great minds and great souls that they put faith in what is not seen with the bodily eye. In other words, it is true faith in what is *not seen* that ultimately saves us. He describes the power of this faith as he continues:

*[This faith] was unshaken by fetters and imprisonment, exile and hunger, fire and ravening beasts, and the most refined tortures ever devised by brutal persecutors. Throughout the world women no less than men, tender girls as well as boys, have given their life's blood in the struggle for this faith. It is a faith that has driven out devils, healed the sick and raised the dead.*

St. Leo goes on to describe how the disciples' faith after Jesus' ascension was actually stronger than it was *before* he went to the Father:

*Even the blessed apostles, though they had been strengthened by so many miracles and instructed by so much teaching, took fright at the cruel suffering of the Lord's passion and could not accept his resurrection without hesitation. yet they made such progress through his ascension that they now found joy in what had terrified them before. They were able to fix their minds on Christ's divinity as he sat at the right hand of his Father, since what was presented to their bodily eyes no longer hindered them from turning all their attention to the realization that he had not left his Father when he came down to earth, nor had he abandoned his disciples when he ascended to heaven.*

In his stunning climax to the sermon, St. Leo says:

*The truth is that the Son of Man was revealed as Son of God **in a more perfect and transcendent way** once he had entered into his Father's glory; **he now began to be indescribably more present in his divinity to those from***

*whom he was further removed in his humanity. A more mature faith enabled their minds to stretch upward to the Son in his equality with the Father; it no longer needed contact with Christ's tangible body, in which as man he is inferior to the Father. For while his glorified body retained the same nature, the faith of those who believed in him was now summoned to heights where, as the Father's equal, **the only-begotten Son is reached not by physical handling but by spiritual discernment.***

St. Leo had it right. For you and I, Jesus is not reached by physical handling, but by spiritual discernment. We come to him by faith. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.

But just because Jesus has ascended and is no longer physically present, that does not mean that he is no longer with us. He is present to us sacramentally, in the bread and the wine. And he is present with us through the power of the Holy Spirit, who comes on Pentecost.

So come to the Lord's Table with faith today. Let the fact that Jesus is no longer physically present *strengthen your faith rather than weaken it*. Rejoice in the fact that in his ascension Jesus carries us up with him and seats us in heavenly places (as St. Paul tells the Ephesians). And rejoice in the fact that, although you do not see him, your faith does not fail, your hope is not shaken, and your love does not grow cold.

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