

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 28, 2017
Ascension Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 110:1-6
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. The Ascension to the right hand of the Father 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.

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 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.

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 was thinking this week of the various places in the Gospels where Jesus tells the disciples that he must go away, and the many places where he mentions that they will be sad, that they will mourn, but that his departure is actually the best thing that can happen.

And then I thought about our text today from Acts, and how Jesus’ ascension is the bridge between his resurrection and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

And then I had a thought. It struck me that if Jesus did not go away, the church would likely never have gotten off the ground. Think about it. If Jesus would have remained, the disciples and everyone else would have probably held back and waited for Jesus to take the lead on everything. They would have waited on Jesus to act before acting themselves.

Jesus knew that. He knew that only by departing to the Father and sending the Spirit to give birth to the church could God’s plan stay on track. By going, the Spirit would soon come, and then the disciples’ witness to the world could begin.

And that's exactly what happened. St. Leo the Great, one of the church's early Popes, captured the dynamic of this in a sermon when he wrote:

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.

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 will be present with us through the power of the Holy Spirit, who comes on Pentecost.

And because of that, we get the privilege of carrying on his work in the world. 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*. And prepare yourself to take up his mantle, and to continue to make him present to a hurting world.

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