

Jesus Shall Reign

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

May 24, 2020 – 7th Sunday of Eastertide: The Ascension of the Lord

- Scripture: Acts 1:1-14 Good News Translation ¹Dear Theophilus: In my first book I wrote about all the things that Jesus did and taught from the time he began his work ²until the day he was taken up to heaven. Before he was taken up, he gave instructions by the power of the Holy Spirit to the men he had chosen as his apostles. ³For forty days after his death he appeared to them many times in ways that proved beyond doubt that he was alive. They saw him, and he talked with them about the Kingdom of God. ⁴And when they came together,^[a] he gave them this order: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift I told you about, the gift my Father promised. ⁵John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”
⁶When the apostles met together with Jesus, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time give the Kingdom back to Israel?”
⁷Jesus said to them, “The times and occasions are set by my Father's own authority, and it is not for you to know when they will be. ⁸But when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” ⁹After saying this, he was taken up to heaven as they watched him, and a cloud hid him from their sight.
¹⁰They still had their eyes fixed on the sky as he went away, when two men dressed in white suddenly stood beside them ¹¹and said, “Galileans, why are you standing there looking up at the sky? This Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way that you saw him go to heaven.”
¹²Then the apostles went back to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which is about half a mile away from the city. ¹³They entered the city and went up to the room where they were staying: Peter, John, James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Patriot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴They gathered frequently to pray as a group, together with the women and with Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers.

Our celebration of Easter seems like so long ago. Six weeks is a long time. Next Sunday will be the fiftieth day after Easter. The Church celebrates that as the day of Pentecost (“*pente*”--like in “pentagon”--comes from a Greek word meaning “fiftieth”). Next Sunday’s celebration of the Day of Pentecost remembers the gift of the Holy Spirit which has empowered believers to follow Jesus in word and deed.

But between Easter and Pentecost there’s another observance—one that happened this past Thursday. That holy day is called the Ascension of the Lord. It recalls when the resurrected Christ returned to the realm of heaven. I don’t think many followers of Jesus give his ascension the attention it deserves. And if we observe it at all, our efforts don’t come close to what we do for other holy days.

Take Christmas: we go “all out” celebrating the Incarnation—the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. Many of the world’s cultures have hopped on board, capitalizing on the gift-giving tradition of the Magi, the “Wise Men.” Indeed, the excess of Christmastime gift exchanges has resulted in efforts like our church’s “Alternative Christmas” Charity Bazaar. We offer the chance to give purposeful, constructive gifts that bless the recipient while also benefitting charity. Yes, I think it’s safe to say that Christians (and others, too) certainly give a lot of attention to the *birth* of Jesus.

And of course, each year we mark the *death* and *resurrection* of Jesus. We’ve given that series of remarkable events a collective name—“Holy Week,” we call it.

- We mark the beginning of that Holy Week with the sign of palm branches.

- The Thursday of that Holy Week remembers Jesus having a final meal with his closest friends in an upper room. We commemorate that by sharing bread and wine in his name.
- The day of Christ's horrific execution by crucifixion has been given the name Good Friday possibly as a variation on "God's Friday" or to remind us of the "good" that Jesus accomplished for our sake.
- And of course, Easter's joy and surprise and relief are remembered by worship and gatherings with family and friends, as well as with cultural expressions like decorated eggs and new clothing and baskets of candy.

Yes, we certainly give a lot of attention to Jesus' birth, death and resurrection.

But his ascension doesn't get as much attention as other holy days. For one thing, the Ascension of the Lord doesn't land conveniently on a Sunday; it happens mid-week on the fortieth day after Easter. Besides, how would popular culture capitalize on a holy day focused on someone going away?

Nevertheless, Christ's ascension *is* a central tenet of our faith. We affirm it whenever we profess our faith using the words of the Apostles' Creed: we say, "*...He ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father....*"

And that line of the creed gives us a clue about why the Ascension is critical to our role as disciples – as followers – of Jesus. It's simply this: because the resurrected, living Christ left the face of the earth, he is no longer confined to a particular place.

You might find it interesting to know about a little shrine that was built centuries ago in the village of Bethany. According to Luke's gospel, it was from Bethany on the Mount of Olives east of Jerusalem that Jesus ascended into heaven. A humble little Christian shrine was built there to commemorate Christ's ascension. The shrine has since been incorporated into a Muslim religious complex, but the Muslims still welcome Christian tourists to the little shrine.

If memory serves, the dome-topped hexagonal building is only about fifteen feet in diameter. It was built to cover a spot in the ground's natural limestone. Tradition reveres that spot in the limestone as *the* place from which Jesus ascended into heaven. Hundreds of years ago the faithful preserved that spot of rock by encasing it with a short marble wall. You can find photos online of the shrine and the rock.

If you use your imagination you *might* be able to envision the mark of a human footprint in the rock – it's certainly not obvious. But as is the case with so many religious sites, it's less important whether this is the actual location of an historical event.

What matters is that the event mattered enough to be remembered. It mattered that the power of the risen Christ to inspire generations of people, nations of people was no longer limited to Jerusalem, to Palestine. By returning to the realm of God the Creator of Heaven and Earth, Jesus now reigns over every place and time.

That truth was expressed by the prolific Methodist hymnwriter Isaac Watts in his hymn "Jesus Shall Reign."

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does its successive journeys run,
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

So yes, we may love the celebrations of Christmas and Easter, and even next week's spirited observance of the Day of Pentecost, that fiftieth day after Easter. But now I hope we realize the impact that Christ's ascension has on the church and on we who believe. Jesus ascending frees him from the restrictions of a particular period of time in a particular locale. His ascension actually brings him closer to us and to all believers everywhere. For from his place "seated at the right hand of the Father" Jesus now reigns over all creation.