

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on May 22, 2022

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

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

This morning we continue our study of the core stories of Jesus. Today we focus on the story of the Risen Christ's Ascension to heaven. One of the truths about approaching Scripture is that we bring our unique cultural experiences to our reading. These personal experiences can sometimes mislead us.

The Ascension of Jesus can often conjure up some strange images in our minds. Some of these pictures can make the event seem surreal. I was a child in the 1960's in the days before VCR's, DVD's and streaming. We did not have the ability to see any movie on demand. All we had at home was television. There was one event we looked forward to every year. It became a tradition that on one Sunday night each year, I think it was CBS, would show **The Wizard of Oz**. For many children this was one of the most important Sunday nights of the year. As most of you know, this movie is filled with the adventures of Dorothy, the girl from Kansas in the magical Land of Oz. You may remember that at the end of the movie, Dorothy is to be taken back to Kansas by the Wizard in a hot air balloon. Just as they are about to lift off, Dorothy's dog Toto runs after a cat and Dorothy runs off to retrieve him. The ropes holding the balloon are untied and the Wizard slowly drifts off into the sky leaving Dorothy and Toto behind. She is left on the ground calling for him to come back and not leave her behind without hope of seeing Kansas again.

The picture of Dorothy looking up as the Wizard leaves her behind is one of abandonment. It can fill us with sadness and a sense of loss. Often, I have read the story of Jesus' Ascension with the scene from the Wizard of Oz in my mind. I can almost see Jesus slowly going up towards the heavens leaving his disciples behind to fend for themselves.

The Ascension might make it appear, like the Wizard, that Jesus is leaving us all alone. We might think of this event as indicating that God has abandoned the world. We might believe that he no longer cares for his creation and that he cannot be found here in this life. It must have been, we would think, a time of great sadness for Jesus' followers. The Risen Lord was no longer with them in the body.

Yet surprisingly there is no sadness found in the Bible. The record of the Ascension is found in Luke and the Book of Acts. In neither book is there a mood of despair. Indeed, in Luke we are told that after Jesus had ascended the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

They experienced this joy because they knew that the limits of the incarnation had been broken. Jesus had taken on the limits of time and space in becoming a human being subject to the laws of nature. In returning to the Father, the constraints of being in the flesh were now broken. The Risen Christ could now be present across time and space.

The disciples were joyful for now they could experience the Risen Christ even more fully. He had promised to be with them even to the end of the age. In his Ascension Jesus became the Cosmic Christ.

You and I might ask where is God?
Where is Christ at work?

The Risen Christ is present in history. The testimony of the Scriptures is that God is at work in history. The Bible itself is the record of God's interaction with his people. It records his saving purpose in the lives of humankind.

The purposes of God are not always obvious to us in the midst of history. Yet the same God who delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the same God who allowed the people of Judah to be defeated and carried into exile is at work today.

George Bancroft was one of the great 19th century American historians. He lived through the carnage of the Civil War. In one of his books he asks this question:

Do nations float darkly alone down the stream of the ages without hope or consolation, swaying with every wind, and ignorant whither they are drifting? Or is there a Superior Power of intelligence and love, which is moved by justice and shapes their forces?

The Bible has a plain answer to that question, for it tells us that God is the Supreme Actor, and that great men and women and great nations and movements are but the brief embodiment and transient realization of his desires. Often in the midst of history we try to get God on our side instead of trying to find where God might be at work.

President Lincoln wrestled with these questions in his second inaugural address:

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.

Even though we live in a time when the world seems to be coming apart at the seams – a time when nothing seems to make sense – a time of polarization and violence – we are called to affirm that God is at work in history. God may be building something new.

God is also present in other people. We learned in Matthew's Gospel a couple of weeks ago, that Jesus said when we help those in need we are in fact helping him. Mother Teresa often spoke of meeting Christ in the poorest of the poor. It is a common experience of people who have given of themselves to serve those in need that they have received more than they have given.

I also believe that we discover Christ in people who care for us. Most of us have at some time in our lives been on the receiving end of caring. We may have needed an ear to listen to our concerns or we may have needed guidance or material help. There are times someone has walked with us through the shadow of death.

Many of us have had a time when someone has said just the right word or stopped in at just the right time to lift our spirits. We have all been forgiven by someone we have deeply hurt. That is the Risen Christ present with us.

The Risen Lord is also present in the Church. Two events are closely linked in the New Testament. Jesus returns to the Father and then the Holy Spirit creates the Church at Pentecost.

The Church is Christ's instrument in the world today. An early Church leader said, "No one has God as Father without the Church being their Mother." God has chosen to create the Church to be a vessel of his presence in the world. He promised wherever two or three were gathered in his name that he would be present with them. He is with us in worship, in fellowship and in serving.

The New Testament describes the Church as a body. As St. Teresa of Avila wrote:

**Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.**

The writer Philip Yancey speaks of the Ascension in these wonderful words:

At the Ascension, Jesus' body left the earth before his astonished disciples' eyes. But soon, very soon, at Pentecost, the Spirit of God would take up residence in other bodies. Their bodies.

The Risen Lord is present in and through the Church.

The Risen Christ is present in the sacraments. We Presbyterians believe in two sacraments. Sacraments are the outward sign of an invisible grace. They are times that God comes to us in unique ways.

Christ is present in baptism. In baptism, water is set apart for a special purpose. It becomes a sign of God's claim upon our lives. In and through water God claims us as his own. As Andrew Murray tell us: **Just as water ever seeks and fills the lowest place, so the moment God finds you abased and empty, His glory and power flow in.** In our baptism Christ comes to us.

Jesus comes to us at his table. The Lord's Supper is a sacrament. When we eat the bread and drink from the cup in some way that we cannot fully understand Jesus is present with us in a special way.

Down through the ages Churches and teachers have tried to explain how Christ is present in Communion. These explanations are often based on the science of their day. The Roman Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation is largely based on Aristotle's physics that dominated the science of the middle ages. Calvin and the Reformers rejected this doctrine for they realized that all attempts at explaining how Christ is present in the sacrament are doomed to failure. Yet both Luther and Calvin affirmed the truth that Jesus is present at the table.

C.S. Lewis got it exactly right when he said the command is not "Take and understand." The command of Jesus is to "Take and eat." And when we eat we receive grace into our hearts and minds.

Finally, God is present in our souls. When we were baptized we received the gift of the Holy Spirit. God's spirit comes to dwell in us. Prayer and meditation help us to be open to hearing that Spirit. The Psalmist tells us "Be still and know that I am God." When we are still, when we are quiet, we can be open to the voice of God's Spirit speaking directly to us. We are spirit as well as flesh. God can speak directly to us.

St. Ambrose tells us: **Let your door stand open to receive Him, unlock your soul to Him, offer Him a welcome in your mind, and then you will see the riches of simplicity, the treasures of peace, the joy of grace. Throw wide the gate of your heart, stand before the sun of the everlasting light.** It is prayer that helps to open our hearts to God. Regular meditation and prayer connect us with the power and presence of God.

So my friends, the Ascension is not an act of desertion. We are not to look back on this event in the Bible as a day of loss. It does not teach us that Jesus has left the world and can no longer be found. Rather the Ascension frees our Lord to be present with all people at all times. The limitations of the Incarnation have been overcome.

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy had to learn that her heart's desire was not something over the rainbow, but rather in her own backyard. So we can learn that God has not abandoned us. He is not only waiting for us beyond the rainbow of death. Jesus has become the Cosmic Christ. He is in our own backyard waiting for us. Jesus is everywhere. May we seek the presence of God in history, in people, in worship and everyday human life. For Jesus is waiting for us. He has promised, **"Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."**