

At God's Right Hand

Ephesians 1:15-23

We celebrate Ascension Day today. It's one of the Feast days of the church, the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus, but we don't make a big deal out of it. European countries may not have many Christians anymore, but they still celebrate Ascension Day, 40 days after Easter, with a day off of work. Here at Memorial we stop lighting the Christ Candle until Christmas, to show that we've reached the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus. The Ascension is as important in the life of Jesus as Christmas is, but we don't get a lot of visitors today.

Ascension seems strange to us. After all, we know that Jesus didn't just go to up to heaven through the clouds. We know what's above the clouds now. We have names for the different layers of the atmosphere, and for what lies beyond. We've seen the pictures from the James Webb Space Telescope and the International Space Center of what is up there. Jesus' ascension doesn't mean he's out on some other planet, like some more cult-like groups believe.

When he was on earth, Jesus was the one who was alongside his disciples. He was with them as they journeyed from town to town. He was with them to teach them and answer their questions. Once he ascended, the Holy Spirit would be the one coming alongside them. The Holy Spirit would come to them, be present with them, and give them peace.

Jesus didn't ascend to abandon us. He ascended to complete his mission. O.P. Kretzmann wrote "The Ascension did not take Jesus away... It brought heaven near... In the realm in which He now reigns time and space have no meaning... There is no up and down, no near and far, no darkness, and no distance in the world of faith... He is as near as yesterday's prayer, today's joy, tomorrow's sorrow... His homecoming has made heaven a home for us who still walk far from home..."

What the Ascension means, though, is that Jesus is now at the right hand of the Father. It means that Jesus rules everywhere. What the Ascension means is that instead of being limited to being only in one particular place at one particular time, Jesus returned to where he exercises his divine attributes of omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. As Eugene Peterson writes, "Jesus rules church and world and every last one of us from heaven's strategic center."

Jesus is in control. What that means for us is that we are not. And that's ok. In fact, that was part of the first sin that Adam and Eve committed at the Fall into sin. They wanted to be in control, instead of letting God be in control. They wanted to be like God.

We can still fall into that trap. We can look around the world and see that everything is still a mess, and wonder if Jesus really is in control. Devotional writer Os Guinness writes, "In short, the modern world quite literally 'manages' without God. We can do so much so well by ourselves that there is no need for God, even in his church. Thus we modern people can be profoundly secular in the midst of explicitly religious activities. Which explains why so many modern Christian believers are atheists unawares." Author Parker Palmer says we fall into the trap of "'functional atheism,' the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us."

Of course, that's all Law. That's all about what we should do, and fail to do. Instead, we need to remember the Gospel, remember what God has done for us. That's what Ascension reminds us of.

Ascension Day is a strange day for us to celebrate, but it's an important reminder of way things are. It reminds us who's in control of the

world, and that it's not us. It reminds us what Jesus has called us to do; to share the knowledge of all that Jesus has done for us, to proclaim that Jesus is Lord. It reminds us that Jesus did descend at Christmas to be born of the Virgin Mary, that he did suffer, was crucified, died, and was buried. It reminds us that Jesus did rise from the dead that first Easter morning. It reminds us that Jesus did ascend to heaven, where he now sits at the right hand of God the Father, ruling above all. It reminds us that He will return the same way that we saw him leave, to bring heaven to earth and to bring an end to sin and sadness. It reminds us that Jesus is the name above all names, and is above all other powers and authorities.

Jesus assumes the place of honor and power "at the right hand" on the throne. Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading and interceding for us. From there he gives us a mission, under his authority, to go and spread the good news of all that He has done for us. He invites us to come forward, to be with him, to take a place with him at a feast that will never end.

This morning we will send the children out to plant flowers around the church outside. Volunteers have gone out to prepare places for these flowers. They have gotten their hands and knees dirty, and will again as the children plant the flowers. We do so as part of Rogate, which is the Latin word for pray. This ritual of the fields has been celebrated since the eighth century in Europe, and reminds us we can pray on earth, for the earth. We can pray in the places where we are; in the places God has planted us. It also reminds us that God didn't just create heaven and earth at the beginning, but continues to be active, making rain to fall and the sun to shine, controlling the seasons and making the seeds grow.

Now, here at Memorial, our celebration of Rogate is influenced not by the moveable

liturgical calendar, but by the academic calendar of Iowa State. It's part of being in the place that we're in. This year, we celebrate it on this Ascension Sunday. It reminds us of why Jesus had to ascend. If he stayed, if he remained with his disciples, they wouldn't have to grow. They wouldn't have had to do things on their own. They wouldn't have traveled to the places they did. But because Jesus ascended, they did. But they went knowing that they wouldn't be alone and that Jesus was in control.

Richard Lischer, a retired homiletics professor from Duke University, wrote a book about his first congregation in rural Illinois, and in it, he describes the Rogate service held there. The congregation gathered together in the church, then walked across the street to a farmer's field, where they placed seed into soil, and asked God to bless it. He ends the description of the service with this explanation of the meaning of Rogate: "When we do any kind of useful work, we join the act of creation in progress and help God keep the universe humming."

After Jesus ascended, what comes next? Now what do we do? The work God has set out for us to do. Jesus is seated at God's right hand, still controlling things. But now we are Jesus' hands and feet. God continues to do his work through us, as we are sent out into the world. We're sent out into our vocations, callings; within our families, in our work, in our communities. We're sent out to where we experience God at work in the world and at work in our lives. As we look out at spring, as we celebrate Rogate this morning, we see the same realization that Dr. Lischer and his congregation had: we are joined in God's work of creation and re-creation.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church, Ames, Iowa
Ascension Sunday (observed) May 21, 2023