

Out of This World
Sermon on Luke 24:44-53 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, May 8, 2005

I don't know about you, but I feel sorry for certain national holidays like Presidents' Day, Flag Day, and Arbor Day. Sure, historians or flag enthusiasts or environmentalists observe these occasions, but by and large, were it not for department store sales, these days would be forgotten. There they are on the calendar, just waiting to be celebrated, but hardly anyone remembers them anymore. Call them the redheaded stepchildren of national holidays, if you like. They are the holidays that pale in comparison to the A-list celebrations like Labor Day, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July.

The Christian calendar, like the civic calendar, has its own oft-neglected holidays, and today is one of them. Actually, today isn't one of them: The real holiday was observed on Thursday. But we are Methodists, and we can't be bothered to come to church during the week any longer, particularly on Thursday. We might miss "The Apprentice" or "ER." And so Ascension Day slipped by, unnoticed and uncelebrated by most of us. We've pushed our celebration off to the Sunday following the actual day, and this year poor Ascension Sunday has to share the spotlight with its much more famous and popular cousin, Mother's Day. If you have come today hoping for a Mother's Day sermon, I will tell you right up front that you are going to go home disappointed because I want to champion the underdog; I want to talk about Ascension Day.

Two questions come immediately to mind. First, what in the world is Ascension Day, and second, why in the world is it important? Ascension Day (or in our case, Ascension Sunday) is the fortieth day after Easter when Christ ascended into heaven as witnessed by his disciples. The Ascension marks the last of Jesus' post-Resurrection appearances as well as his exaltation in

glory to the right hand of God. There, according to the reading from Ephesians, Jesus is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come” (Eph. 1:21).

Luke describes the ascension itself pretty simply: “While [Jesus] was blessing [his disciples], he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven” (Lk. 24:51). A Victorian-era commentary describes the scene rather more poetically: “Incarnate Love, Crucified Love, Risen Love, now on the wing for heaven, waiting only those odorous gales which were to waft Him to the skies, goes away in benedictions, that in the character of Glorified, Enthroned Love, He might continue His benedictions, but in yet higher form, until He come again!” (I think the Victorians never missed an opportunity to over decorate either rooms or Bible passages.)

So if Ascension Day celebrates Jesus’ leaving the earth for the heavenly realms, why is it important? Are we really missing out if we don’t have fireworks and floats to celebrate? I think it is important to celebrate Ascension Day because the Ascension marks two things. First, as Fr. Joseph Fitzmyer points out, the Ascension is the “crucial marker” both in the phases of Christ’s existence and in the stages of salvation history.¹ Prior to the Ascension, Christ was with his disciples, physically present to them, teaching them, leading them, praying with them, and sharing in every aspect of ordinary human life. The Ascension is the last time Jesus is visibly perceptible to his disciples. After he was taken up into heaven, they saw him no more.

Jesus’ transition from life on earth to life in heaven also marks a transition in salvation history, as we move from the Period of Jesus to the Period of the Church.² Since the human Jesus was no longer physically present, the movement that bore his name must now manifest his presence and his ministry in the world. In and through the Church, Jesus becomes present to the

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible, volume 28A, New York: Doubleday, 1985, 1588.

² Ibid.

world in the breaking of bread “in soup kitchens, around the kitchen table, and around the altar table.”³ In and through the Church, Jesus becomes present to the world in the healing of the wounded, in the preaching of the good news to the poor, in the comforting of those who mourn, and in the work of peace and reconciliation. Jesus has left us; he has left us the task of continuing the work he himself was doing as a sign of God present with us to save us.

And perhaps more important than the changes in Jesus’ existence or stages of salvation history, the Ascension is important because in it Christ moves through the heavens to share with his heavenly Father in glory. As Fred Craddock says, “[A]scension means that Christ has entered his glory, exalted and enthroned at God’s right hand.”⁴ And what that means is that with Jesus at God’s right hand, God’s power is unleashed into the world. Again, Ephesians tells us that “God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:20). Ascension marks the completion of Easter, and for that reason the Paschal candle is extinguished after today’s Gospel reading. When Christ ascended into heaven, God’s mighty work of bringing new life to the world is complete. Now that power is waiting to be set free in the world.

But this power of God, the power to heal the sick and feed multitudes and raise the dead, is a tremendous force. It is a power that can come only to those who are prepared to move and work and minister under it. And so Jesus commanded his disciples to wait in Jerusalem “until [they] have been clothed with power from on high” (Lk. 24:49). The power they are awaiting is the power of the Holy Spirit, the power that has been at work throughout Jesus’ own life and ministry. Before they can receive the Spirit’s power, Jesus must give a final word of instruction and commission his disciples to continue his work.

³ R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, New Interpreters Bible, volume IX, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 490.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990, 294.

Our commission, our work, the work for which the Ascension prepares and empowers the Church, is very simple: it is to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name to all nations (Lk. 24:47). We cannot do that work unless we, like the disciples, first understand the scriptures. Before he sent the disciples out into the world to preach his message, Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (24:45). This suggests that knowing God or learning what the Bible means is neither a solitary, purely individual enterprise, nor an activity of autonomous reason. We can't—as many churches claim—simply read the Bible on our own and understand what it means. Only Jesus who is the subject of the scriptures can open them to us and allow us to understand its true and life-giving message. Since the ascended Jesus now abides in the Church through the Holy Spirit, we can only read and understand the scriptures in the Christian community. We won't know what Jesus means when he says, "Love your enemies" until we have served on a church committee or what he means to have childlike faith until we have worked with developmentally disabled children at Night OWLS.

We must understand scripture because all of it—the law, the prophets, and the psalms—all point to Jesus. They point to a messiah who must suffer and die and on the third day be raised from the dead. The story isn't new; it is written on all the pages of scripture. The salvation of God's people has been God's plan all along. From the beginning, God has sought a way to offer us a share in the life of God. It is Jesus the Messiah, now living at the right hand of God the Father, who makes possible this life with God through repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

And so we celebrate the Ascension, Jesus' going to share in his Father's glory to open the way for us, his followers, to continue his ministry. We do so when we worship and break bread and minister to the poor and oppressed, all in the power of the Holy Spirit. The work we do is Jesus' work, and it is out of this world.