

June 4, 2017 (Lake Harbor UMC)

## "What Difference Does the Ascension Make?"

Acts 1:1-11

The story we have just read is strange and surprising:

The Risen Christ meets his disciples one last time,  
tells them what to expect next, and then....  
Disappears from their sight.

The Scriptures say he "was taken up into heaven"  
And that he was now "hidden from their sight".  
The Scripture accounts also say that the Risen Jesus  
is now "exalted at the right hand of God"...(in other words...)  
from Space/Time to transcendent realm of Maker of Space/Time...  
and that someday—in God's own time—he will return  
as the true Judge of the living and the dead.

What can these phrases mean?

Many churches have stopped saying them.

Somehow the idea of Jesus disappearing into the clouds  
seems a little embarrassing;

and the idea of "judgment" is clearly unpopular in our culture.

(My seminary teachers dismissed as "mythological window dressing...")

So what shall we make of these promises of Scripture  
that Jesus has ascended to the Father,  
and that He shall come again to judge the world?

How do they make sense in our world and time?

How can we come to hear them as good news that changes the world?

Is anything different because of the Ascension?

**Let me begin by telling you a modern parable of the last judgment  
which may help us to grasp what the biblical images are showing us...  
it goes like this:**

At end of time, billions of people  
scattered on a great plain before throne of God:

People talked in groups....belligerantly...  
 Can God judge us?...Can God know our suffering?

Young woman...ripped open a sleeve...  
 a tattooed number...Nazi concentratn cmp.

Another group: black man...pulled collar to reveal  
 ugly rope burn..."lynched...for being black!"

Far out across plain...groups shout complaints agnst God:  
 God is lucky in heaven...what does God know...  
 God leads a pretty sheltered life...

Each group sent out a leader...who had suffrd most...  
 A Jew, an African slave,  
 a person from Hiroshima, a murdered child;  
 In center of plain, they consulted...  
 then presented their case:

Their case was clever:  
 Before God cd be their judge,  
 God must endure human suffering;

Their decision: God must be sentenced to live on earth as a human being.  
 Let him be born a Jew.  
 Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted.

Give him a work so difficult that even his family  
 will think he's out of his mind;  
 let him be betrayed by his closest friends;  
 let him face false charges,  
 let him be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge,  
 let him be tortured.

Last of all, let him see what it's like to be terribly alone. Then, let him die.

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence,  
 shouts of approval went up from the throng...

When they had finished pronouncing sentence  
 there was a long silence:

No one uttered a word. No one moved.

For suddenly everyone knew that  
 God had already served his sentence." [*Jesus Hope*, 60f]

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This parable tries to capture both the agony/anger of human suffering/injustice,  
 And the surprising good news of the gospel:  
 God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ  
 and because of that, everything is different.  
 All suffering and sorrow and human life can be looked at with different eyes.

**The burden of my sermon this morning is to declare that  
 because of what has happened in Jesus Christ in the Ascension,  
 God is different...! [We are different...power....prayer...even jdgmnt]**

**[God]** The adventure of the incarnation, the divine mission into the world  
 to take on our human nature, the "Word become flesh..."  
 this was not a brief travel excursion by God...  
 so that God went back unchanged to the realm of heaven....  
 When Jesus ascended to the Father,  
     He did not abandon our human flesh and nature;  
     He did not drop his risen body and dissolve into pure spirit.  
 The story from Acts says... "This **same Jesus**...will come back..."

What the Ascension is teaching us  
 is that Jesus has carried our human nature and flesh  
 into the Eternal Presence of God...  
 into the innermost life of God's own Being.

When the Christian faith says  
 we believe in the Ascension of Jesus to the Father,  
 we mean that Jesus now lives as one of us with God.  
 He is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.  
 Of course, he has died and is risen, so his risen body  
     is a transformed body, but a **body** nevertheless.

The physicality...the sheer fact of God taking human flesh in Jes of Naz,  
 as a baby in Bethlhm, as the suffering Messiah on the Cross,  
 as the Risen Lord from the tomb, the scars still visible...

this is not just a temporary episode...it has **finality even for God!**

From now on God is different,  
because God has bound Himself to us & us to Christ,  
by taking our human nature and flesh into the  
burning heart and being and reality of God.

The Ascension shows us Jesus taking our humanity  
with all its difficult, resistant, and unpleasant aspects...  
taking them up into the heart of God's creating/redeeming love...  
the only place where we can be healed and transformed...fulfilled.

The God who created humanity refused to give it up to the powers of death & evil;  
The God who comes to us in Jesus says: "I will make their suffering mine";  
God says..."I want us to be joined together eternally" ...

**So, if God is different because of Ascension day,  
then, everything is different for us too.**

Because Jesus is risen from the dead and ascended,  
every human life, every human body is significant.  
Since we are each made "in the image of God", an image that has been  
broken and marred and distorted and dishonored,  
God in Jesus has taken that image and renewed & resurrected it,  
giving us a whole new future.

As he was leaving his disciples, Jesus told them he was sending his Spirit:  
And on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended, and frightened disciples  
Became brave and joyous evangelists;  
They transformed the ancient world by spreading the good news  
that no human life is insignificant bec God has become one of us.

Now, Jews & Greeks, slaves and free, women and men, gathered around  
The Lord's Table in worship...Christians resisted the cheapness of human life  
in the surrounding pagan world and healed the sick, helped the poor,...  
And even went about rescuing abandoned and dying babies from the garbage  
dumps of Roman cities...

Because Jesus is ascended and because of the gift of the Holy Spirit,  
The followers of Jesus then/now are given the life of Jesus...and something of

Jesus' capacity to see and hear and feel the "edge and the ache of human anger and suffering."

But there is more. Not only is our perspective on ourselves & our neighbor different,

**Now we know that power is different.**

Now we can see thru the so-called power  
of the Pontius Pilates and power-brokers of the world.

We know that real power is in the hands  
of our risen and ascended Lord.

Jesus, the innocent sufferer, the Lamb of God, has the real power,  
the ultimate power, and not just at the end of time,  
but now, in the present,  
because He is with the Father....and one with the Father.

Since Jesus sits at the right hand of God,  
Then all earthly kingdoms and powers, all kings and presidents,  
All legislators, and even dictators and tyrants  
Are merely temporary rulers....  
If they declare what is Justice or Truth, it can only be under the authority  
Of the One we know to be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

When Jesus first appeared as a baby in Bethlehem,  
King Herod got very nervous...and when Jesus was brought before Pilate,  
The powers of Rome took every step to assert their power.  
And even today, the powers of a secular age tell us that we should speak  
Of the authority of Jesus only in private in our prayer closets and chapels.

This is why the Church always has to resist injustice,  
And to speak out against falsehoods and lies,  
Because we worship the One who is the Truth and the Life,  
And we know him to be at the right hand of the Father.

Whatever powers of the world threaten us, we are able to say to them:  
"Your time is only temporary....you may oppress us, or persecute us,  
But we are citizens of another kingdom, and we know where  
our true King is...."

**Not only is power different,  
but prayer is different.**

Because Jesus is now at the right hand of God,  
he speaks for you and me.

Prayer is much different when we realize  
that our poorly formed prayers,  
which are often inadequate or desperate and too infrequent--  
these prayers are said in the name of Jesus  
who intercedes for us, who has the Father's ear...  
who is not ashamed to call us brothers & sisters...

If we could remember this,  
if every time we are tempted to despair of praying  
we could say, I believe that Jesus has ascended  
with my hurt and suffering and need to the  
very presence of the Father....then, we might not  
lose heart so quickly in our praying...

**But if all that is the Good News of the Ascension,  
how can Jesus' coming again in Judgment be Good news?  
How does the Ascension make our understanding of Jdgmnt different?**

The first thing we must say is that  
we know who the Judge will be;  
the Judge will be someone who is personally committed to us.

Jesus was condemned by biased judges,  
but we shall be judged by someone who shares our human nature,  
who lived and suffered and died, who took on himself the whole burden  
of human sinning and injustice and hatred and rejection.

That is why the Scriptures and the Creeds do not say,  
we believe the world will come to a terrible end...  
(Yes,..."wars and rumors of war..." but that's just history!)

No. The Christian Faith says: we believe that "He shall come..."  
He...who suffered under PP,  
He...who bore our sins...who died for us...who rose for us,  
And who, even now, intercedes before the Father for us.  
Who, when he was ascending, said..."Go, tell the whole world."

John 3:17 (Message par.) *God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him, is acquitted. Anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it.*

This means, then, that our whole idea of Judgment has to change....Judgment is not just something that comes at the end of time...Judgment has begun already now in the present.

Whatever happens at the end of time is already being shaped now, because Jesus is with us whenever we meet another human being he died for.

You know that Christians have often been accused of sitting complacently around waiting for "pie in the sky by and by" ...for Jesus to return.

What the Scripture wants us to see, is that Ascension & Jdgmnt get us moving...they don't encourage us to sit down.

We believe that God is different...prayer is different... we are different--because Jesus is with the Father, because, also, Jesus is with us especially in the weak & poor & hungry brothers & sisters we meet.

Because Jesus has sent us his Spirit,  
 We are empowered, in the midst of a world that is full of suffering and failure,  
 We are empowered to see and hear what God can do.  
 We remember that Christ has raised our human nature  
 To the side of the Father, so that our compassion is deepened,  
 And our hope for the world is expanded.  
 We have hope for the future, bec we know the Lord of the future.

It is often said these days, "Christ has no hands but our hands..."  
 But I don't think that is quite right.  
 It suggests that Jesus has gone away and now it is all up to us....  
 As if Jesus had said, "I'm leaving, now **you** save the world."

No, the message of his cross and resurrection and ascension is this:

Jesus has already saved the world. All things are different.  
Without Him we can do nothing.  
Unless we are in him, unless we allow our hands to be his hands,  
Our eyes to be his eyes, our ears his ears,  
We delude ourselves, pretending to ourselves  
That it's now up to us **to make him real.**  
NO. He is the one who must **make us real**, and whole,  
And forgiven, and healed.

And he is the one who will come in final judgment,  
But Who, also, is here, waiting to be received this morning at his table...

Let's go there...