*Sermon for Ascension Sunday, Year A*

*21 May 2023*

*St. Matthew’s Riverdale; the Rev. Trent Pettit*

*Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53*

Today we are celebrating the feast of the Ascension. For many centuries the feast of the Ascension was considered the fourth great festival of the church year, along with Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. But today the feast of the Ascension often goes under-celebrated in the life of the Church, if it is not totally forgotten altogether. One reason for this might be that it simply seems to conclude the drama of Jesus’ earthly ministry. It seems like the action has come to a close, so we’re kinda stuck in a backward looking position.

But, I suppose, the real concern with the forgetting of the Ascension… is with what it seems to confirm. The Ascension seems to confirm our current, default sense of the world, which is this sense that God is absent from it, from our lives. In other words, the Ascension seems to legitimatize the question, “Does God exist?” Or “Does God *still* care about me?”

Jesus’ instructions to his disciples at his Ascension—his instructions to “wait” on the Spirit—seems then to place us in a kind of disciple-d *inaction. “W*aiting” is key to understanding who we are in the world after Christ’s ascent. But, our modern, default posture in respect to faith that seems to be confirmed by the Ascension, seems to demand we do otherwise than wait. Disbelief seems to demand *principled action.* The Ascension seems to confirm this basic feeling, that if God has “left” us, we not only *can…* but *must* go on as if God never existed at all. This is where we “live,”… in a world where God’s ascent seems to imply… that we are to get on without God and so *seize* the steering wheel of history ourselves, even if we lament it.

But, the Ascension is not about divine absence exactly. The world really is different after it. It’s not that things simply return to how they were before the incarnation after the Ascension. The Ascension does not mean that God’s involvement with the world is over either.

Recall the way that Jesus appeared to the disciples on the Emmaus road at his resurrection. He reveals himself to them by talking and walking with them on the road, and then he *eats* with them. In this eating, Jesus’ physical presence is recognized by the disciples… in the breaking of bread. Jesus then goes on to do this a second time for them in Jerusalem.

We might wonder why Jesus breaks bread *twice* with the disciples. It seems important, since he does it more than once, anyway. Now, Jesus has already showed them his hands and his feet, in order to prove to them that he was not a ghost. The resurrection is of the flesh. So, why does it seem important that the risen Jesus eat with the disciples? Does the risen Christ still need to eat? *Or*, was he showing his disciples that his life goes on, and it is for that reason—that Christ’s life goes on—that the disciples need to eat, because he does it with them.

So, Jesus is not just showing his disciples that his risen body is real, although that is really important here. Jesus’ breaking bread with his disciples shows us that we should not think that Jesus’ Ascension involves an escape from the flesh. While Jesus’ body becomes “spiritual” in the resurrection, he remains substantially human, … not ghostly, not immaterial, but… eternally human. His flesh, Immortal. Jesus’ life goes on, so the life of the disciples, too, goes on, and in a really intimate way. They eat, as One Body with Jesus.

After Jesus’ resurrection appearances, the disciples remain a bit bewildered, as you might expect. Then Jesus gives his disciples instructions just before his ascent. They are different now. Because of all they have seen, they are now “witnesses.”

When Jesus appears to them this final time—in the passage we just heard from Luke—he shows them, again, how he is fulfillment of everything written in the law, prophets, and psalms, that the salvation of the world hangs on him, who suffered, died, and rose again from the dead on the third day. And so, now, they are to go and proclaim the name of the one in whom repentance and the forgiveness of sins has, finally, come. But, before they do this, before they go out to the nations, Jesus tells his disciples to go back to Jerusalem and… wait. From there, the disciples’ first act of obedience to the ascended Lord will place.

From there, Jesus then leads them to Bethany, where he ascends to the right hand of the Father.

*That* the Ascension happened at Bethany is significant. We might recall that it was at Bethany that Jesus’ passion began. Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem happened there, at Bethany (Lk 19:29-40). But now, it serves as the location for Jesus’ final exaltation, when Jesus is taken “away” and “up” to the Father. In this sense, Jesus first, “waits,” obediently giving himself over to the Father’s will, just as he did during his whole earthly ministry, doing not his own will but that of his Father. And, it is this same pattern that he gives to his disciples. This posture is part of their apostolic inheritance. But the disciples’ obedience isn’t removed from the intimacy they had with Jesus during his earthly ministry after Jesus ascends.

During the resurrection, it is was Jesus’ risen flesh that was made visible; but, now, what’s made visible is Jesus’ glory and kingly power (9:26, 32, 51: 19:12). His glory and power is made *visible* to his followers as the evidence that Jesus’ humility and humiliation on the cross, far from disqualifying the divine sanction of his mission, actually *proves* its full embrace by the Father.

The Ascension is God’s great confirmation of his on-going sovereignty over the world. But, when Christ ascends, he does *not* do so by leaving behind his human nature. No, this Christ maintains, which means that our humanity is actually taken into divinity itself. That’s the implication of the Ascension, that’s the awesomeness of this feast-day. That’s why it is so central to the Christian life.

God humbled himself by taking on a human nature and dyeing on the Cross, and, when he ascends, he brings humanness into the glory of God. Humanness—the humanness we all have— has been brought into God himself. Our humanity Christ has made to ascend… into the divine life. Our intercessor, Christ, is the eternal*-human-being* who, forever, intercedes for us before the Father.

He is the human assurance that our words reach the Father’s ear.

He is the human place in the Father’s Kingdom.

While God ruled the world before the incarnation, now God rules in communion with One who is just like us.

But, we still might ask: when the disciples are waiting in Jerusalem, in what sense is their future, the horizon into which they look any different after Christ’s ascent? Is is not that God has “gone away”? No! I hope we can see this. The disciples—you and me—are configured to God in a totally new way. Reconciliation with God, the forgiveness of sins, has been achieved on the Cross—yes—but with the Ascension we get *communion* with God.

You see, sinners need Christ’s humanity to mediate God to us. But now, humanity, too, has been mediated to God! That is, our humanity has been sanctified, so as to have an eternal place with the Lord.

The humanity of Jesus, seated powerfully at the Father’s right hand, gives us access to God forever. Jesus not only reconciles us to God, but really makes us *participants* in the very life of God itself. How? Because he has really brought humanness there! Being reconciled to God does not simply render us “forgiven” in a way that makes us “right” *but still very distant* from God. No; we are really given a *communion*, even a *participation* in the life of God. And, this participation is called Church. The Ascension is the birth of the Body of Christ, his flesh and blood on earth, connected to its heavenly-but-human head, Christ.

Christ accomplished this by becoming *wholly* and *utterly* one with us. He didn’t descend in secret, nor did he make even a public condescension temporarily… like an earthly ruler who puts on beggar’s clothes… mingles with the crowd a little bit…then throws them off again to return to a higher place. No, he did this by belonging to humanity in every way. And, he did this, not to renounce affiliation with us, but in order to call us *definitively* and *unashamedly* “friends” in eternity.

There is now a human being at the center of the universe—Christ!—and, so, everything has been changed. Don’t let the “all too human” nature of your life fool you. God loves your humanity more than you ever could. And, the Ascension is proof of this. The Ascension shows us that the modern question, “Does God exist?” Is answered in the positive! God exists, but not only that—God’s identification with his creation continues in heaven!

Because of the ascension, we can see our humanity affirmed in Christ. In Christ, we see the human face that sees, delights, judges, and loves his creation from heaven, exactly because Christ has known our humanity, in its depths and in its most mundane. He has known the extremes of suffering and death, but he has also taken on our growing up, being tested, our grieving and rejoicing, even gendered experience. And, He has taken all of this, all of this that is good and fallen of humaneness and restored it in His own image. And he remains our great high priest, but not simply “away” from us. Yes; Christ ascends… but, he does not flee the life of the flesh. The life of the flesh is redeemed and sanctified, taken into heaven in the person of Christ, our forever-intercessor before the Father.

This is the implication of the Ascension. God does exist, and he continues to identify with our humanity, even in heaven.

And so, we too, like those early disciples in Jerusalem, have been made witnesses to all these things. We face the world, the future, not as mere “believers” in the facts of Christianity, but as those enjoined to God’s very life! Jesus really is the fulfillment of all the hopes of the law, the prophets and the pslams. He is the fulfillment of every human longing. He is the One in whom… already… heaven and earth, divinity and humanity, have been reunited.

For, the Father has established communion with us through him, his Son, forever, and he continues to invite us to dine with him today.

Even now, he is sets his table before us.

Amen.