

Up, But Not Away

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Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — Sunday after Ascension, May 8, 2005 (Mothers' Day)

Acts 1:1-11 NIV

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Ephesians 4:4-13 NIV

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called — one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

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A preacher who follows the traditional church calendar often faces a dilemma around this time of year. We're passing through the seasons of Eastertide, Ascensiontide, and soon Pentecost and Trinity Sunday. These are seasons that celebrate the ways in which the Father has acted through his risen Son, and through his Holy Spirit, to bring salvation and new life to the people of God. These events lie at the heart of the gospel, and to ignore any one of them is to truncate our full understanding of what God has done for us. We need to pay attention to these things.

But, in North America, another agenda gets laid over these events. During a period when many churches put aside the time-honored, traditional Christian calendar and opted for what they thought was a more culturally relevant set of observances, another series of special events crept into our Sunday worship. These events have come to have a sacred, inviolable quality that even evangelical preachers can't really ignore. Whether we're talking about Memorial Day, Father's Day, Independence Day or Thanksgiving, these days overlap the traditional church calendar. And so Ascension Sunday, or Pentecost, or Trinity, are likely also to be *Mothers' Day*, when we remember and honor those women who have given us the gift of life and nurtured our young lives.

So motherhood has something of a sacred quality to it. Along with apple pie, baseball and the American flag, motherhood is enshrined as an icon of our culture. And that's a good thing. Amidst the

ravages of the abortion holocaust, which has engulfed us in what Pope John Paul II called “a culture of death,” it’s beneficial to take a day to celebrate motherhood, and to remember those women who have joyfully taken on the wonderful honor of giving life to a new member of the human family. Childbearing comes at a cost, a price no man ever has to pay, a price of inconvenience and discomfort and pain that no man can really understand — and today we think of women in our own congregation who have been through, or are now passing through, that kind of travail that only an expectant mother can know.

If we were going to speak only of motherhood today, we would take time to lift up some examples of mothers in the Bible, women through whom the Lord acted to further his plan for history and the salvation of his people. We would speak of Sarah, who though past the age of childbearing, gave birth to Isaac, the son through whom the Lord would fulfill his promise to Abraham of a multitude of descendants. We would think of Jochebed, mother of Moses, who hid her baby in a basket so that his life would be preserved as a member of Pharaoh’s household. We would tell of Naomi, who made a home for her daughter-in-law even as both grieved the loss of their husbands, and of Ruth who took Naomi’s advice and became, through her son Obed, an ancestress of the Christ. We would mention Deborah, who “arose as a mother in Israel” and spurred her people on to defeat their enemies. We would tell of Hannah, who pled with the Lord for a son, then gave him back to God to become the great prophet Samuel. We would speak of Mary, who said, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” — Mary, who like Hannah rejoiced and said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” We would mention the unnamed mother of Rufus, whom the apostle Paul thought of as his own mother. We might even speak of some biblical mothers who made a misstep or two, and yet God used them. Eve yielded to the tempter’s enticement but still became the “mother of all living,” which is the meaning of her name. Bathsheba fell into sin with King David, lost her first child, yet became the mother of Solomon and another ancestress of the Christ. Sarah, herself, laughed at the Lord’s promise, yet the Lord didn’t abandon her as the instrument of his purpose. The list goes on. From these mothers mentioned in Holy Scripture we would learn lessons in humility, prudence, bravery, determination, unselfishness, and devotion to God.

But, today is not only Mother’s Day but also the Sunday after Ascension. Ascension Day was Thursday, the fortieth day after Easter. It celebrates that time when, after his resurrection, Jesus appeared one last time to his disciples and commissioned them to take the gospel to the world. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you,” he told them. “And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Then, as the disciples stood by in awe-struck wonder, Jesus was taken up into heaven, veiled in a cloud of glory, and two messengers in white appeared. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “don’t just stand here looking up into the sky! Jesus will come back to you, just as you’ve seen him go.” The disciples must then have remembered what Jesus had told them during their last meal together: “I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you” (John 14:18). They must have remembered what Jesus had said to them after he was raised from the dead: “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:20). In the Ascension, Jesus was *taken up* from his followers, but he wasn’t *taken away*. Through his Holy Spirit, he’s with us always.

What does the account of the Ascension of Christ in the Book of Acts tell us? It’s one of the Bible’s ways of proclaiming the sovereignty of Christ — his enthronement as King of kings and Lord of lords. Other parts of the Bible say the same thing in different ways. In the Revelation to John, we meet Jesus as “one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe,” who declares, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore” (Revelation 1:13, 17-18). Later we see him reigning with his Father in the new Jerusalem, “the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Revelation 21:22). The apostle Paul says of Christ that “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11). The author of Hebrews applies the 8th Psalm to Jesus, declaring, “You crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything under his feet” (Hebrews 2:7-8). The risen Jesus, himself, tells his apostles, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). The New Testament abounds with statements like these proclaiming the sovereign rule of the risen, ascended Christ. These statements are the basis for the Apostles’ Creed: “He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;

from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.” These statements are the foundation for some of the greatest hymns of the church, including the one with which we began our worship today:

*Crown him with many crowns,
The Lamb upon His throne.
Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns
All music but its own.
Awake, my soul, and sing
Of Him who died for thee,
And hail Him as thy matchless King
Through all eternity.*

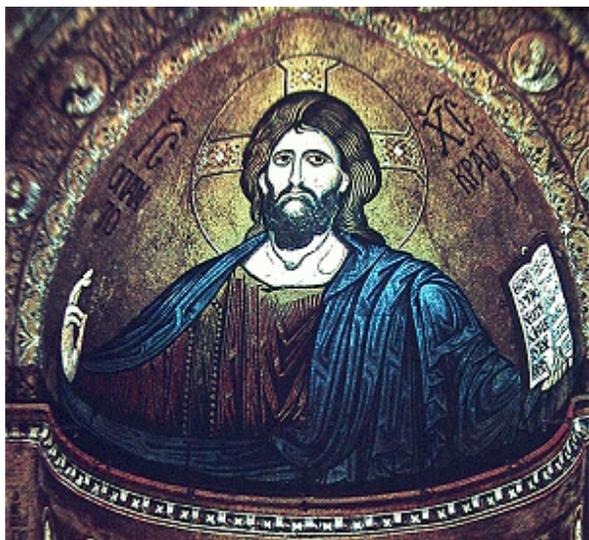
The enthronement of the Lord, signified by Christ’s Ascension to the right hand of the Father, wasn’t a new idea for the apostles. The enthronement of God as King was part of the faith of Israel. The Psalms, especially, bear witness to how the Hebrews celebrated his ascension and enthronement. Take, for example, Psalm 47:

*God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.
Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the King of all the earth;
sing to him a psalm of praise (Psalm 47:5-7).*

Psalm 68, which we read as our Psalter this morning, also refers to the ascension of the Lord:

*Sing to God, sing praise to his name.
Extol him who rides on the clouds — his name is the Lord — and rejoice before him.
When you ascended on high, you led captives in your train.
You received gifts from men, even from the rebellious,
That you, O Lord God, might dwell there (Psalm 68:4, 18).*

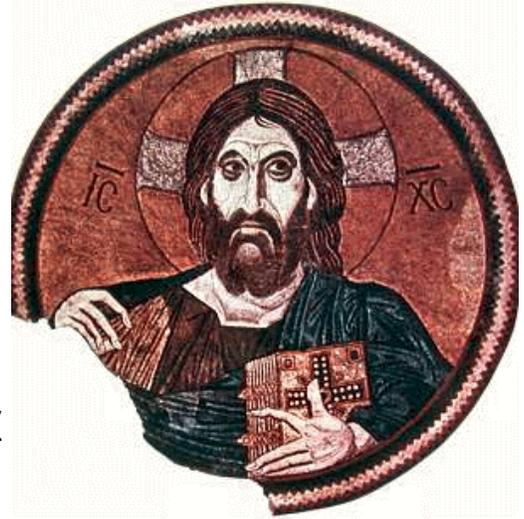
Israel’s festival worship apparently included a time when Yahweh, the Lord, was proclaimed as King — when he ascended or “went up” to take his throne, just as an earthly king is crowned, or a president is inaugurated, or another leader is sworn in or installed. So the idea of the King’s ascension — his inauguration, if you will — wasn’t a new idea for the earliest Christians. What was new was the declaration that *Jesus Christ is the King*, ruling jointly with his Father as King of kings and Lord of lords. That’s what the Ascension story is all about. It’s a message the church must continue to proclaim, even in a world that doesn’t want to hear it.



Why is the Ascension important? It’s important as a reminder of who Jesus really is. Some of the old Byzantine churches of the Mediterranean world have, above the altar, a huge mosaic of Christ as the heavenly ruler. Typically he’s holding the Gospel book in his left hand, blessing with the right hand, and looking down at his worshipers with a somewhat austere expression. It’s a powerful picture of the ascended, sovereign Christ. Perhaps you’ve seen Orthodox or Catholic icons with the same pose. It’s called *Christos Pantokrator*, or “Christ the Ruler of All.” Images of this kind remind us that Jesus Christ isn’t the “harmless fuzzball” he’s sometimes made out to be. Yes, there’s mercy and grace in Jesus, and forgiveness of sin for all who repent and turn to him. But along with that mercy there’s a certain severity to the

ascended Christ, the Judge of the living and the dead. As Psalm 130 puts it, “There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.”

And the Ascension is important for another reason. It's from his heavenly throne that the ascended Christ pours out his Holy Spirit, and bestows his gifts to the church. Because Jesus rules from the right hand of the Father, his followers are equipped to do his work in the world. That's clear in our reading today from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. In this passage, Paul quotes from our Psalm, Psalm 68. But he quotes it in a different version. The Psalm says, "When you ascended on high, you led captives in your train. You *received gifts* from men." Paul's version reverses the thought: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and *gave gifts* to men." The difference probably comes from whether you translate the Hebrew verb as active or passive. But it doesn't really matter — both ideas are correct. The ascended Lord both receives gifts and gives them. We may compare the Ascension to a wedding, in which the bride and groom receive gifts from their guests, and also give them to their attendants who stand with them. Christ who ascends to the right hand of the Father receives our tribute — our obedience and our praise. But through his Holy Spirit he also *gives his gifts* to us for ministry and for witness and for service in the body of Christ on earth. It's the ascended Christ, Paul says, "who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."



That's not, by any means, an exhaustive list of the gifts Jesus pours out into the life of his church. You probably didn't think I would ever get back to Mother's Day in this message, but here we are. When a Christian woman gives the gift of life, and then devotes herself to bringing up her children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," this is the gifting of the ascended Christ at work in his body. Those great mothers of the Bible were able to do what they did because of the Ascension of the Lord — because "God has gone up with a shout" to take his rightful place, enthroned as Ruler over all things and equipping his faithful people for witness and service. In God's covenant, we are all *family* and we all draw strength from our Head. The Ascension of Christ reminds us that *we have his gifts* and can use them to bring honor to him, blessing to his people, and great peace and satisfaction to our own souls.

And one more thing. In our passage from Acts, just before his Ascension, Jesus says to his apostles, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" — or, as the traditional version says, "unto the uttermost parts of the earth." This is a mandate for evangelism and Christian missions, but sometimes, I think, we misread this passage. We think of *ourselves* — our town and our church — as our "Jerusalem" from which the gospel must go forth into faraway parts of the earth, the "uttermost parts." But the Bible is geographically specific. Jerusalem means Jerusalem, where the church started, and then expanded into Judea and Samaria — and eventually reached where we are. From the Bible's standpoint, North Aurora is one of the "uttermost parts" of the earth — a mission field, a place where the good news of Jesus' power and his healing and his love and, yes, of his authority and his judgment has yet to touch the lives of so many we meet from day to day. Mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, beloved of the household of faith: the ascended Christ has gifted us to seek and serve the lost. We're a *worshiping* church, a *teaching* church, a *sharing* church and a *caring* church, and through the abiding lordship of Christ in our lives we're able to witness his presence to others. He has *gone up*, but he hasn't gone away.

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