

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER - ASCENSION

June 1, 2014

¹⁵For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²²And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

When do preparations for Christmas begin here in Kentucky? in October or November? In the church they begin in December, four Sundays before Christmas – the season we call Advent. Preparations for Easter begin on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of that forty day period we call Lent. Last Thursday was Ascension Day. Did you even notice? Were there any preparations? Were there any celebrations as there are with Christmas and Easter? Ascension Day in the Christian Church is a part of the Easter season, the seven weeks of celebration of the Savior's rising from the dead. Really, all during these seven weeks we have been preparing to see his bodily ascension to heaven. We knew he would not be staying with us here on this earth.

The facts of Christmas, Easter and Ascension are clear to us; we know what happened. But it is also important to know why it happened. In the opening chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Christians of Ephesus Paul is offering a prayer – he is praying that Christians know why all of this happened and that they find hope and purpose for their lives through faith in Christ Jesus.

Because there are no secular observances of Ascension it can easily pass by unnoticed. We have noticed today and we want to take a few minutes to talk about the ascension and its meaning for our lives today. Let's talk about those words that we confess each week in both the Apostles and Nicene Creeds:

"HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN."

HIS ASCENSION LEADS US TO PRAY TO OUR GOD (15-19).

PAUL WAS IMPRISONED FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL.

The prospect of death was very real for him. Of course, he hoped to be released. It would have been proper for him to write: "Pray for me and pray that I am released." Yet what is Paul doing? He says, "... **Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.**

What was it that led Paul to pray for them in this way? It was their faith. Paul was overjoyed at their faith. These were people who did not just hear the message of the gospel with their ears, but they believed it with their hearts. These were people who showed their faith in the way they lived and in the way they regarded Paul and all the other believers. This led Paul to continue to pray for the Ephesian Christians. As Paul prays for them he is praying that

they learn even more to know the greatness of God's power. He says, ¹⁸"**I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹and his incomparably great power for us who believe.**"

Paul is thankful for the faith and love of the Ephesians. He breaks into a petition that God would open their eyes to see the greatness of God's power. What would make that possible for the Ephesians? Only a vital spiritual connection of faith with Christ would make that possible. And it was possible in Ephesus. It was happening in Ephesus!

THE REVELATION GOD WAS GIVING WAS HIS WORD.

Paul says, "¹⁷**I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.**" The revelation that God was giving them was his Word. If they were going to have true spiritual wisdom it would come only from God's revelation in his Word.

Look what that meant for the Ephesians. He prays that the "**eyes of your heart may be enlightened.**" That would happen as they studied the Word. That would happen as they came to know what Christ had done for them, was presently doing for them, and would still do for them in the future. That would happen as they came to the full realization that this was a faith-matter for the heart and not merely a head-matter for the intellect.

Paul wants them to "**know the hope to which he (God) has called**" them. He wants them to know the hope they have as the children of God. And he wants us to know the same thing. As we see what our risen and ascended Lord has done for us we are filled by the Holy Spirit with immense certainty. As we see what God has done for us in the redemptive work of Christ we see the vast superiority of God's message and God's hope over human and self-made hopes.

Look at the greatness of the ascended Christ's glory. We know that we have a hope that is built on something certain and solid. We know that there is nothing from God's side that will ever disturb that hope. The bodily resurrection and the bodily ascension of Jesus Christ make that eternally clear for us. All of this is ours by faith because God did his redemptive work in our hearts; it is ours because of the work of that risen and ascended Lord.

THE BODILY ASCENSION OF JESUS CHRIST BACK TO HIS FATHER IN HEAVEN REMINDS US TO PRAY TO HIM.

He is now in heaven seated at the right hand of his Father waiting to receive our prayers and to intercede on our behalf at his Father's throne. It is our faith in him as the Savior that motivates us to turn to him in prayer. We pray because we believe he will hear us and he will answer our prayers. And, as we pray to him we are giving evidence of our faith. Let's look at it this way. Picture yourself as a branch on a fruit tree. Now the main purpose of a fruit tree is to produce fruit, right? There can be no fruit without the tree and its branches. And, a tree and branches are not complete without the leaves, flowers and fruit. Using this picture then there can be no works of faith without the tree – Jesus Christ. And Christ is not complete in his purpose and work unless he has branches – that's us – who are producing the fruit of Christian good works and a good Christian life.

For us to do that our Lord has given us "**the Spirit of wisdom and revelation.**" He has given us "**his incomparably great power.**" People want power. We've seen the evidences of

military power in recent months, especially in the struggles in Ukraine. We've seen examples of destructive power in the suicide bombings around the world. We see physical power given us by our Lord to live our daily lives. We see power to move an automobile or stimulate an economy. And yet none of that compares with God's power. His power is far beyond earthly and human power. This is the power of a Creator God – one who could create this world in all its beauty by the power of his Word. This is the power of a Redeemer God – one who could send his own Son to die on a cross for the sins of the world, to rise from the dead on the Third Day, and ascend back to the right hand of his heavenly Father in all his glory. That's the power we need to hold on to. That's the power our God gives us through his Word and Sacraments. We need to turn to our powerful God through faith in Jesus Christ for his powerful answer to all our prayers!

HIS ASCENSION LEADS US TO SEE JESUS IN HIS FULL GLORY (20-22).

PAUL EXPLAINS TO THE EPHESIANS AND TO US JUST WHY JESUS HAD TO BE "EXALTED" AND COULD NOT REMAIN IN THE EARTHLY STATE OF "HUMILIATION" FOREVER.

Listen to Paul: **"That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."** All too often people want to limit Jesus to the three years of his earthly ministry and the example he gave during those years. Many will see his glory only in the miracles he did during that earthly ministry.

Paul reveals to us that there is much more. We see his glory in his descent to hell to show his victory over the devil. We see his glory when he rose from the dead on the Third Day. We see his glory as he ascends bodily back to his Father in heaven. We see his glory as he sits at the right hand of his heavenly Father hearing our prayers and interceding for us. And, we will see his full glory with our own eyes when he comes in that glory on the Last Day.

As our exalted Lord and Savior he is ruling the entire world right now! He is ruling the visible world we see as well as all those things that we do not see with our eyes. He reveals to us that all things – seen and unseen – are under him and under his control. That is why the visible, bodily ascension of Jesus into heaven is so important. We needed to see that his earthly, visible, work was completed. He was returning to heaven to assume his place of rule over the whole world and over his believers in particular.

Martin Luther said it well: "Christ is the chief Treasure, the basis, the foundation, and the sum total of all things, in whom and under whom all are gathered together..." Look at the paradox of it all: Christ filled his church and we through faith fill him.

Just think what that meant to the Ephesians. This was written some twenty years after Christ's ascension. He was no longer visibly present to them. Yet the Last Day, Judgment Day, would still be some time off in the future. The tribulations of the sinful world would continue. But through it all the living and ascended Lord was watching over them and blessing them. For that they could truly thank and glorify God.

WE NEED TO KNOW THAT "WAY" YET TODAY.

We need to see and know the ascended Jesus as our High Priest, our Prophet, and our King. As our High Priest he intercedes for us at the throne of God besides having offered

himself as our sacrifice for sin. He was our Substitute. As John said in 1 John 2:1-2: **“I write this to you so that you will not sin. If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”**

As our Prophet He established the gospel of that reconciliation with God and continues to proclaim it through his church. God the Father said, (Matthew 17:5):**“This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”** Peter put it this way when he said (John 6:68): **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”**

As our King he who established his church now rules in our believing hearts through his gospel. He now tells us, his church today, to **“go and make disciples (by) baptizing and teaching.”** His promises are there to his church today as he says, **“I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.”**

We need to see our need of him today and every day. Remember, we cannot go it alone in life. Oh, one might try, but true life and true hope and true satisfaction will only be found through faith in him. That power of the risen and ascended Savior is there for us. May our reminder of the ascension this morning remind us of that fact and lead us to use that power for our spiritual well-being all through life here and even to eternal life! Amen.

Sermon by Pastor Roger Zehms
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