

## **Sermon: Blessings We Can't Count On**

Year C, Ascension

[Acts 1:1-11](#); [Psalm 47](#); [Ephesians 1:15-23](#); [Luke 24:44-53](#)

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In addition to Mother's Day, we're celebrating the Feast of the Ascension today, although it technically occurred last Thursday, forty days after Easter. If you think of the words we use during our communion liturgy or during our prayers, we thank God for Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. Birth, well that's Christmas, and that's certainly celebrated, even by people who aren't celebrating anything else about Jesus. Life, that's every Sunday. Death is commemorated on Good Friday. And of course we celebrate his resurrection on Easter. Now we celebrate all of them as a whole when we gather together, every communion meal we share together, every time we serve the community in his name. But we don't put much thought into celebrating his Ascension, perhaps because we bundle his Resurrection and Ascension together. Yet that's the moment when Luke sees the Christian experience pivoting.

As an author, Luke wrote both his gospel and the book of Acts. The Gospel focuses on the preaching and teaching, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The book of Acts focuses on the work of the disciples after Jesus' ascension. So there is a pivot here, a major pivot, in Luke's account. Luke sees the Ascension as the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, so this is where he breaks his account in two.

So if this is such an important moment for one of the important biblical authors, we should probably take a minute to think about the Ascension on its own.

Jesus has spent some time on earth with his followers, not just the 11 disciples that remained after Judas' betrayal and death. Different gospels give different amounts of time. For Luke it was forty days. According to Luke, when Jesus was preparing for his earthly ministry, he went into the wilderness for forty days. So too, when he prepares for his heavenly ministry as he helps his followers finish their preparation for their earthly ministry, it takes forty days.<sup>1</sup> This may only be a round number, or a round number that fits in neatly with Pentecost's fifty days,<sup>2</sup> but the key is that there was a meaningful stretch of time between Jesus' Resurrection on Easter and his Ascension. That time was spent in meaningful work of a new and different kind, work that could not possibly be done before his Resurrection.

The Ascension is this key pivot for a number of reasons, but we don't see it anymore, because we're so used to the idea that of course Jesus ascended bodily to heaven. So, like Luke, let's take a moment to look at what happens in this moment when the life of the Christian church changes course.

There are other people in the Bible who are brought back from the dead. There are other people who shine with the glory of God. But none of them are exalted.<sup>3</sup> No one else in Holy Scripture is raised up to reign with God. No one else is given dominion over the earthly powers. No one else is given dominion over death. Today, we have an understanding of the Trinity, one God in three persons. But that understanding took centuries to develop.

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Maile, *The Ascension in Luke-Acts*. *Tyndale Bulletin* 37 (1986): 53.

<sup>2</sup> Maile, 52.

<sup>3</sup> Maile, 55.

This moment of Ascension was absolutely key to realizing what God was saying through Jesus' Resurrection. The Ascension confirmed that Jesus was more than important, more than a holy teacher or a prophet. The Ascension showed Jesus being raised to sit at God's right hand, to be part of the force that rules over everything. Yes, Jesus was fully human, he had a mom to celebrate on Mother's Day. But he was also fully divine. The Ascension brings that divine nature into full focus.

So if the Ascension emphasizes Jesus' divine nature, what does that mean for his earthly teaching? Think about his disciples immediately after they learn of his Resurrection. They don't know what to make of it. They run away. They're afraid. They know they don't understand what's going on. They doubt. At the end of the Ascension, they return to Jerusalem with great joy, knowing what they are to do, worshipping and ready to wait until they are *clothed with power from on high* (Luke 24:49). The Ascension is the sign that Jesus' earthly ministry continues in his heavenly ministry.<sup>4</sup> It's not over. The commandments to love one another and love God still hold. The today's reading from Ephesians talks about having a *spirit of wisdom and revelation*, about having the *eyes of the heart enlightened*, about knowing *the hope to which Jesus calls us* (Ephesians 1:17-18). The disciples had been working on that. The Ascension assures them that they should stay the course. What they had been taught in Jesus' earthly ministry would continue in his heavenly ministry.

By the same token, the Ascension does emphasize Jesus' divine nature. The Ascension helps to clarify that not all followers of Jesus will appear bodily after death nor will other earthly followers of Jesus see them ascend to heaven.<sup>5</sup> It doesn't mean it isn't happening or it won't happen. But it does reassure us that while God loves all of us and cares for all of us, there is a specialness to Jesus that can't be evident in all of his followers.

The Ascension does indeed mark Jesus' departure from the earth. But that very departure makes it possible for the Holy Spirit to enter the world.<sup>6</sup> Next week, during our celebration of Pentecost, we'll focus on the arrival of the Holy Spirit. But with Jesus still physically present in the world, there is no need for the Holy Spirit to be here. Furthermore, with Jesus clearly in heaven, it is time for Jesus' followers to get on with their work.<sup>7</sup> In the last moments on earth, Jesus tells us to *proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins* (Luke 24:47).

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, the Ascension is the pledge of Jesus' return.<sup>8</sup> Yes, his followers saw him go away. There's no doubt that he went or where he went. He said he was going to leave them and he did. But he also said he would return. We can be sure of his return to this earth because there is no doubt of his departure.

Think of his followers in the forty days after Jesus' Resurrection. They have been taught kindness and community, turning the other cheek and being their brother and sister's keeper. They have been taught to serve each other, to repent of their own personal sins and the sins of their community as a whole. They have been urged to forgiveness, both for the wrongs committed against them as individuals and as a community. Little of what they have been taught by Jesus will make them fit more seamlessly into their wider community because their wider

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<sup>4</sup> Maile, 56.

<sup>5</sup> Maile, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Maile, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Maile, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Maile, 58.

community is indifferent or hostile to their beliefs. They certainly live in a culture where might makes right and the one with the most toys wins.

As they struggle with their own convictions about how and whether to stick with the beliefs and behaviors Jesus taught them, the Ascension is a bold reminder to keep going. Luke will go on to write a whole other book about what the first steps of that journey looked like. It won't be flawless, there will be missteps and mistakes. We can read the history of the Christian church and see great successes in following Jesus' teachings and great failures. And from the very beginning of our mission as Christians, we have been urged to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. Jesus' most powerful proclamations were the actions he took, so it's probably not enough to talk about repentance and forgiveness. We have to actually do it.

When you look at it, there is so much meaning in the account of the Ascension that we take for granted. Each aspect is a blessing and each blessing is real and reliable. And yet, if we don't see them, if we don't recognize them, can we count on them? In the exercise we did during the Children's sermon, some of it was really small and silly. But the larger point is worth noting. We have hundreds of blessings surrounding us every day that we just don't notice. Sure many of them are tiny. But some of them are huge, so big that we no longer notice them, they are the background on which our lives play out. If we don't see them, can we count on them?

In one sense, of course we can. Jesus reigns at the right hand of God, whether we remember that or not. Jesus' earthly ministry continues through his heavenly ministry, even if we never heard of or can't remember much about his earthly ministry. The Holy Spirit is here in this world and we have work to do in this world whether we realize it or not. Jesus will come again to this earth, whether we believe it or not. And what a relief that all those blessings have been given to us, regardless of how little we deserve them. Those blessings are there as real and reliable as gravity.

We often overhear people complaining about something, and compared to our own problems they seem so petty and small. "Count your blessings" we want to tell them. "Try having that problem and a mother-in-law with Alzheimer's or a kid with Asperger's." If we can't see the blessings we have, as real as they are, we won't count on them.

Part of why the church sets aside a day to celebrate the Ascension is so we can count the blessings Jesus was bestowing on us as he was carried up into heaven (Luke 24:51). Without this day, they may become invisible to us as a community. It's also a good reminder that we are surrounded by real and significant blessings every day, gifts that God has given us without us even realizing how wonderful they are or even that they have been given. We can repent for having forgotten to notice them. We can forgive ourselves and begin to count on them. So too can we take this Feast of the Ascension to open the eyes of our hearts and see the blessings that Jesus has given us that we've taken for granted all along. The Feast of the Ascension reminds us to look for the blessings we can count because we can't see them. Because they're there, blessing us without fail all the same.