

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

May 21, 2023 – ASCENSION SUNDAY, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Why is Jesus’ Ascension so Important?*”

First Lesson	Acts 1:1-11	(Jesus ascends into Heaven; on the Father knows when He returns)
Psalter	Psalm 47	(God has gone up with a shout; He is King over all nations)
Second Lesson	Ephesians 1:15-23	(God has raised Christ into the heavenly places)
Gospel	St. Luke 24:44-53	(Jesus opens the disciples’ minds to the Scriptures and ascends)

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How excited were you about coming to church this morning? Easter-Sunday excited? Did you wake up extra early so you could get a good seat in the pews? There’s something special about Easter, isn’t there? After all, how can you top the message of Jesus’ resurrection? However, today, we’re celebrating Ascension, not Easter. Ascension was the day when, forty days after Jesus’ resurrection, He was visibly taken up into heaven.

While we might not think this festivity deserves the same kind of attention as Easter, Jesus’ disciples thought differently. In fact, they were *more excited* at Jesus’ ascension than they were at His resurrection. How could that be? Why is Jesus’ ascension so important? Let’s try to answer that question.

The background of today’s Gospel account didn’t take place all on one day. The first part happened on Easter evening. You remember how Jesus’ disciples were hiding behind locked doors that night, afraid of what the Jewish leaders might do to them if they were discovered.

During the day they had received various reports that Christ had risen from the dead, but for the most part they remained skeptical. Even when the risen Jesus appeared in their midst that evening some still doubted until He took a piece of fish and ate it in their presence to prove that He wasn’t a ghost or a figment of their imagination.

It was unfortunate that the disciples were so slow in believing. They should have expected and been looking forward to the resurrection, for as Jesus had said: “everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”

Yet, like them, we too can suffer needlessly when we don’t take to heart God’s Word—whether it’s His invitation for us to call on Him in the day of trouble (Psalm 50:15), or to cast all our anxieties upon Him (1 Peter 5:7). Instead, we bottle up our worries until we’ve managed to concoct a nasty brew of anxiety and fear that’s just as sinful and hazardous to our spiritual health as drinking poison would be for our bodies.

It’s not that we lack knowledge; we *know* what God has promised. But often, we lack a fuller understanding of God’s promises and sufficient trust that He will fulfill them. We lack this understanding and trust not because we aren’t bright enough, but because we are sinful by nature, and therefore don’t automatically accept what God tells us, or asks of us.

St. Paul explained this in 1 Corinthians 2:14 (NIV): “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.” So, even if you were the smartest person in the world with an IQ of a thousand, without the Spirit of God you still would not be able to understand, accept, or obey God’s Word.

Jesus made that clear in what He did for His disciples. St. Luke tells us (Luke 24:45), “Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.” This was the first fulfillment of a promise Jesus had given them. He had promised that after He ascended into heaven, He would send them the Holy Spirit who would open their minds to understand Scripture. In John 16:13-14, Jesus told them:

“When...the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.”

So why is Jesus’ ascension so important? Because it is directly linked to the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. And because the Holy Spirit tunes us into the divine wavelength so that we can understand God’s Word, believe it, trust it, and obey it.

Still, we need to be on our guard, because the devil will try to steer us away from Holy Scripture, through which the Spirit works. As he did with Eve, he will try to get us to ignore or doubt God’s words, whispering things like, “Did God actually say gossiping about another person is a sin?” Or, “Did He really promise that He will make everything, even pain, work together for your good?” When the devil assails us with such doubts we need to remember what Jesus said concerning the Scriptures: that it was necessary for everything written about Him in the law of Moses, and in the prophets and the psalms, to be fulfilled (Luke 24:44).

In other words, God’s promises don’t come true more-or-less; they come true *absolutely*, because when God speaks, things happen! That is why His Word can be trusted *absolutely*. With His ascension, Jesus not only promised to grow our understanding; He also promised to increase our usefulness in His kingdom. Christ said to the disciples, “repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in [my] name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:47-49).

“You will be clothed with power from on high.” Wow, what a gift! Jesus didn’t leave us with an autographed picture, a lock of His hair, or a relic from His manger or cross. Rather, He has given us something better: the very power of God, mediated to us through the gift of the Holy Spirit—which, coincidentally, we will celebrate next Sunday, on the Day of Pentecost. Now, notice Jesus said we would be *clothed with* the Holy Spirit—not be plugged into Him from time-to-time like a fluorescent light bulb on the fritz.

It was this gift of the Holy Spirit that turned the disciples into such productive and effective witnesses for Christ. Imagine what they would have been like without having received the Holy Spirit following Jesus’ ascension. They would have continued in hiding, utterly failing to proclaim Jesus’ life, death, and victory over death. In fact, there would be no Church for us to attend, today, or ever.

Like them, we, too, can become more confident and bolder to carry out God’s work because First John 4:13 assures us: “This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.” That said, what exactly is God’s work? It is, first, to share the truths found in God’s Word—as well as our personal stories about what Jesus means to us—so that people turn away from sin and find forgiveness in Christ. Then, once they are believers, ridding the world of hunger or campaigning for social equality mean so much more to God than when such works are done simply as secular good deeds.

However, before we can be bold witnesses like the transformed disciples, we have to start by witnessing to *ourselves*. Unless we first apply God’s law to ourselves, and recognize our own sin, we won’t see the need for forgiveness. And if we can’t see need for *our own* forgiveness, it becomes more difficult to truly care about what Jesus has done for us, or can do for others. When our understanding is increased, and we become more productive for the Lord, we also experience greater joy.

We can see this in the disciples on Ascension Day, as our text concludes: “While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” The disciples didn’t return to Jerusalem with plain old joy, but with *great joy*! Not only that, instead of going back into hiding, they stayed continually in the Temple praising God out in the open where everyone, even the Jewish leaders, could see them! What a difference Jesus’ ascension made in their lives.

Can Jesus' ascension make a difference in our lives? It can, if we understand what it's all about. The disciples rejoiced greatly and openly because they knew Jesus' ascension wasn't His retirement. Christ did not ascend so He could kick back by the heavenly pool with the Father and the Holy Spirit while things just muddle along down here. Jesus' disciples knew that His ascension wasn't a sabbatical or a vacation before Christ would reappear to judge the world.

Rather, they finally recognized that His ascension was a coronation—even more spectacular than the one in Britain that many of us watched on TV a couple of weeks ago. Jesus' followers now understood that He had fought the battle with death and the devil, and had won. The time had come to publicly acknowledge that triumph, and for Jesus to resume the full use of His divine prerogative, which He had set aside in order to come into our world.

That's why Jesus' ascension is so important. Think of it this way: How would you feel if a close friend was elected President? Wouldn't you expect to receive a few perks from your buddy? Well, we have it even better with Jesus. He doesn't just give us a few perks. As our ascended Lord, He grants us everything we need. Now in Heaven, fully crowned as King of the Universe, He has the power to dole out every imaginable blessing—and that's what He's promised to do.

St. Paul makes that quite clear in today's Epistle lesson, as he writes: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come."

So, why is Jesus' ascension so important? Since Christ Himself has been raised and is seated at the right hand of God, where He rules with all power for the benefit of His Church, our lives are also lifted up. Our existence is raised to new life because Jesus is using His divine power for our benefit, working all things to our good. Moreover, now that He's in heaven, Hebrews 7:25 (NLT) tells us that Jesus "lives forever to intercede with God on [our] behalf." Wow! *Christ is praying for you and me!* It's no wonder the disciples celebrated Ascension with great joy!\*

Today, we join in their celebration. For Christ is risen, He is risen indeed! And, as our resurrected Lord, He reigns supreme, rules over all, and mediates our concerns to God the Father through His prayers. Jesus does all of this for us, His beloved children, for whom He cares beyond all measure.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen.

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\* Adapt. Daniel Habben, "What's Up With Jesus' Ascension?" 22 May 2007, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/what-s-up-with-jesus-ascension-daniel-habben-sermon-on-lordship-of-christ-106989). <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/what-s-up-with-jesus-ascension-daniel-habben-sermon-on-lordship-of-christ-106989>> 8 May 8, 2023. Used with permission.