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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
6/5/2011, Ascension Sunday
Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53
One of Us Has Done Well!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from our Epistle Reading. It is a glorious reading encompassing one long sentence. I want to pick up on St. Paul's teaching about the high elevation of our Lord Jesus, far above every other authority in the universe. The apostle writes this:

...according to the working of his great might ²⁰which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹*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 that which is to come; (Ephesians 1:19-21, RSV)

One of us, then, has done well! One of us has made it to heaven, far above every other authority and name. Yes, one of us has made it to heaven, and this bodes well for the rest of us.

Ponder the difference between earth and heaven, the vast distance, not so much in geography, but in dignity. Here below, we are a fair-to-middlin' race, with our relentless and weary mixture of good and bad, of virtue and vice, of sin and godliness. If the liturgy calls us to bend the knee at the start of things and make our confession, well, many of need to do so. The liturgy drives us to our knees fair and square. But in heaven above, all are pure, all are noble, all are godly. The angels, the cherubim and seraphim: they are radiant with the beauty of holiness. If we were to see them, it would be with us as it was with the guards at the tomb of Jesus, that the mere sight of an angel would overwhelm our senses and knock us to the ground:

³His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow:
⁴And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men.
(Matthew 28:3-4, KJV)

But as glorious, radiant, and holy as these heavenly beings are, our Lord Jesus ascends above them -- indeed, as our text puts it, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion." One of us has done well, I say.

When I was a young man, I was in the military for a while -- the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Two years, during serious times, during the Vietnam War. The first summer at the Academy is Basic Training, same as for soldiers all over the land. The thing about military training is that it is designed to

push you so hard, that you are likely to discover some new things about yourself -- some strengths you did not know you had and likewise some limits. Of course, these strengths and limits shift as the training goes on. Still, it is interesting that at any one moment in Basic Training, you might get a sudden snapshot of where you are, when you have been pushed to the ends of your strength.

You've seen the Obstacle Course, for example, on movies or commercials for the Army or Marines. You've seen the soldier climbing the wall and jumping over, running up the hills. What the commercial can hardly capture is how fatigued the soldier might be, tempted to just lie down and give up. Or you've seen the soldier at the top of the high dive platform, ordered to jump into that swimming pool, with combat boots on. It's not so hard if you are a confident swimmer and if you have some experience with jumping from the high tower into the lake back home, but if you are a newcomer to it, it can be a terrifying challenge. Most of us cadets made it through the various challenges of Basic Training.

Ahh, but the following summer, we faced the culminating challenge. After SERE you were welcomed into the cadet wing as an upperclassman, and then things were much better. But back in my day, it is not clear that any of us made it through SERE with our heads still up. SERE is an acronym for "Survival, Escape, Resistance, and Evasion." All of that was okay, except for the resistance phase. Survival and evasion in the mountains, we could do all that. But could we escape the prisoner of war compound part of the training? Even worse, could we resist the interrogations, could we resist through the blows and the darkness and the disorientation and the fear of suffocation, could we resist through fatigue and hunger and the collapsing morale of our colleagues? All of this is of little significance compared to what real soldiers go through. It is small potatoes. Still, it meant a lot to me back then. And rumor has it that one of us made it. Rumor has it that Scot made it. I can believe it too, for Scotty looked mild, but he was strong as a horse and had nerves of steel.

There is a lovely passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews that speaks of "running the race with perseverance":

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us... (Hebrews 12:1, RSV)

The problem is, who of us has actually done it? Who among us has simply set aside "every weight and sin which clings so closely" and gone ahead and run the race -- run that race all the way to victory? It is hard to do so, because we live in a world that tempts us, vexes us, exhausts us, and disappoints us. But rumor has it that one of us made it! One of us made it all the way to heaven, to the right hand of God the Father, and has been placed in charge of things. This bodes well, I say, for the rest of us.

The festival of the Ascension of Our Lord does not work unless we take Christmas seriously. For if God did not become Man, then it is nothing special for God to ascend to heaven. So, Ascension asks us to go back to midwinter and to reckon again with the doctrine of the Holy Incarnation of Our Lord. We believe that in the baby Jesus, God has become man. Truly man. Fully man. As the Church Fathers and Luther used to delight in saying, Mary looks down at the Babe in her arms and thinks to herself, “The child I hold, holds me. Aye, he holds the entire world up!”

On Christmas, divinity became permeated with humanity and therefore divinity became vulnerable to sin. Only Jesus did not sin! He *could have*, because he was tempted in every way such as we are:

¹⁵For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15, RSV)

Think of your worst temptation! Christ has been there, only without sin.

Exhaustion and fear could have led him away from his neighbors, frustration with humanity could have driven him from the path of love, the kingdoms of the world and all the glory thereof could have distracted him from the sick, the lame, and the sinner. These things could have happened, but they did. Not even on the cross did Jesus say, “Enough! Curse these human beings!” Rather he died with words of forgiveness on his lips.

Therefore God the Father and the Holy Spirit have raised him up to eternal life. They have judged that *this* is the human being worthy of being in charge of the rest of us. And they have exalted him to the right hand of the Father, far above every other power in the universe. One of us has done well, again I say.

But what would it have profited us, if Jesus is raised to heaven, but we fair-to-middlin’ ones are left behind? This question is what leads us to the completion of St. Paul’s grand sentence. For after speaking of the ascension of Jesus, the apostle Paul immediately speaks of the Church. That is, he speaks of you and me and all who will bear the name of Christ. The apostle writes this:

²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; ²²and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the *head* over all things for the church, ²³which is his *body*, the fulness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:21-23, RSV)

Let it be a firm rule concerning bodies, both of physiology and of ecclesiology, that where the head is, there is the body. That makes sense, doesn’t it? There can be no great distance between the head and the body. And so the Church fathers believed that the ascension of our Lord to heaven means that the Church is glory-

bound too, meant for heaven. St. John Chrysostom, then, speaks of Ascension as a great engine lifting up humanity:

Amazing again, whither hath He raised the Church? as though he were lifting it up by some engine, he hath raised it up to a vast height, and set it on yonder throne; for where the Head is, there is the body also.

Imagine those great medieval pulley systems by which huge pieces of granite were hoisted aloft for the building of the cathedrals. Such an engine is Ascension: Ascension is radiant with the plan of hoisting you and me and everyone one willing all the way up into heaven.

Ascension, then, asks us to think nothing small-minded concerning either Jesus or the Church. Jesus has ascended to heaven and therefore heaven is our natural home.

Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? (1 Cor. 6:3, KJV)

Do not, then, settle for small things. Flee from vice and sin as entirely unsuited for one meant for Christ, for Christ lives in heaven, and we are meant for that fair land.

¹If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. (Colossians 3:1, RSV)

“Seek the things that are above,” urges the apostle. Seek them, both for your encouragement and for your inspiration by the Holy Spirit.

For your encouragement, take comfort in the claim of our text that Jesus has been elevated “far above” all other authorities:

²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; (Ephesians 1:21, RSV)

In this earthly life, there are plenty of authorities, some good, some wicked. There have been authorities before whom others trembled, as when they stood before Nazi or Stalinist interrogators. But blend all these voices into one Supervoice if you will -- all the individual authorities and bosses and governmental officials, all the governments at local and national levels -- blend them into one great voice of authority: that voice is far below that of the one to whom you belong, Jesus Christ our Lord. And whatever judgment they render here below awaits confirmation or rejection from the Voice that really matters, the voice of our Lord Jesus. So, the world can huff and puff all it wants. It can mock, hurt our feelings, humiliate, even condemn to death. That is all very tentative, very hypothetical. It all depends on

the true voice of our Shepherd -- a voice that shall ring through all eternity. And it is a good voice -- the very voice of the Good Shepherd.

Finally, for the sake of our nobility of soul and our life in Christ, ponder this too: there is one other voice far below that of Jesus. I mean the voice of sin, the voice of temptation. That voice has pushed and pulled us astray more than enough. And it is eager to do so in the future too. But one day, that voice will fade before the voice of Jesus. One day, that voice will be revealed to be a fraud, pretending to offer fullness of life, but actually stripping life away from us.

Ascension means that sovereignty belongs to Jesus. He has the right to the final word in our lives, both on the great judgment day to come and here and now. His voice might be a still, small voice in your conscience, but cherish that voice, for it is the very voice of truth and love for you. Altogether, do the best you can to bend your knee before him who is elevated far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.