

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/28/2014, Ascension Eve
Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For many reasons, we can be happy about the Ascension of our Lord Jesus. This Sunday, for example, a few days from now, I mean to lift up the life of our ascended Lord as our great Intercessor, praying for us and for our world.

For this evening, I want to speak simply of the arc of his life — the shape of it. Holy Week is not that far in the past. During Holy Week we watched Jesus at the lowest point of his exhaustion. He who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself (Philippians 2), reached the terrible depths of his emptiness on Good Friday, when he was betrayed, denied, abandoned, and crucified.

Now we turn upwards, to our Lord's elevation. My main text for this sermon is from our Epistle Lesson, from Ephesians Chapter 1.

[The Father of glory] raised [Jesus] from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, 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 1:20-21, RSV)

Some people live a charmed life on this earth. They are born into prosperity and never know poverty. They are endowed with cheerfulness of spirit, with good friends, with meaningful work, with good health, and they live out their years in peace. But Jesus was not such a one.

They say that Jesus died at age thirty-three. The older I get, the more sorrow I feel that Jesus died so young. These things are relative, off course. When I was a teenager enjoying the Beatles, I thought thirty-three was pretty old. Nowadays, it seems quite young to me, and I cannot help but think that the life of Jesus was cut off too soon — far too soon. Such a good man should have been loved and supported and should have had decades more of life to live. But it was not to be. It was part of the arc of our Lord's life that his story is soon told. It was with him as Psalm 90 says — that his span of life was “labour and sorrow” and “soon it was cut off.” (Psalm 90:10)

Again, some people live a charmed life on this earth, moving from victory to victory, from height to even greater height, until rather smoothly they pass on to heaven. But Jesus was not such a one. The Jesus whose Ascension we celebrate this evening is One who not all that long ago, had lived with such poverty and simplicity that he had nowhere to lay his head. He had spoken of that:

“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” (Matthew 8:20, RSV)

The Jesus whose Ascension we celebrate tonight is not someone who lived a delicate life removed from the misery of this world. Rather, where the sick were, there was Jesus, and so we read this summary passage of the manner of our Lord’s life:

...and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. (Matthew 4:24, RSV)

Where the leper moved like a ghost on the outskirts of the community, there was Jesus:

²and behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” ³And he stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. (Matthew 8:2-3, RSV)

Where the sinner stood and the stones were already gripped in self-righteous fists, there was Jesus right in the midst of that angry crowd, defending the adulterer and calling her to sin no more:

¹⁰Jesus looked up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.” (John 8:10-11, RSV)

The Jesus whose Ascension we celebrate tonight did not ascend from the Mount of Transfiguration. He did not move from the company of Moses and Elijah on the holy mountain right on up into heaven. Rather he is the One who descended from the mountain to heal the lunatic boy and restore him to his father who heretofore had been so heartbroken.

And here, my friends, is a key theme for you and me and for our discipleship: All of our Lord’s lowliness was voluntary. All of this poverty and lowliness was acceptable to him as part of a consecrated life dedicated to God and to humanity. It was a path Jesus freely chose. Jesus “emptied *himself*,” as Saint Paul put it. All of this world’s power and glory *could have been* enjoyed by Jesus (Luke 4:5-7). Why, even in the midst of his life and death struggle, he could have called twelve legions of angels to defend him (Luke 26:53). But none of this for Jesus. No such glory for him. When he ascended into heaven, he rose from the lowly reaches of poverty, leprosy, blindness, lameness, sin and guilty consciences. He ascended

into heaven from such depths because that was where he was needed, and he was willing to go. And if we would follow the pattern of his life, we should hope for ascension into heaven even if meanwhile we humble ourselves to the depths in love for this world.

The British Baptist Charles Spurgeon had a moving passage along these lines in one of his sermons:

Oh! what a stride was that, when, at one mighty step from the grave to the throne of The Highest...Christ...did gloriously ascend. And yet reflect! He in some way, mysterious yet true, was exalted *because* he suffered. "Being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. *Wherefore* God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name." Believer, there is comfort for thee here, if thou wilt take it. If Christ was exalted through his degradation, so shalt thou be. Count not thy steps to triumph by thy steps upward, but by those which are seemingly downward. The way to heaven is down-hill. He who would be honoured for ever must sink in his own esteem, and often in that of his fellow-men. (Spurgeon, "The Exaltation of Christ")

What a perfect line that is! "The way to heaven is down-hill." That's because if we permit Jesus to have his way with us, he continues still to move down hill, toward a world that remains in need of him.

SOMETIMES WE CANNOT EXALT OURSELVES

Let me conclude by lifting up one more of Spurgeon's themes from that same sermon. In this theme, Spurgeon takes delight in the simple idea that it was *God* who elevated Jesus into heaven. It is as our text from Ephesians 1 says:

[The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory] raised [Jesus] from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places...

Or, as Saint Paul puts it in Philippians 2:

⁸And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore *God* has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name... (Philippians 2:8-9, RSV)

The acclaim of this world is a fickle thing. It can raise an inner city child to the throne of glory, in the world of sports or politics or music. But it can also toss that same child off and forget about him before long. But it was not the world that elevated Jesus into heaven. Rather, God did this good thing. The One who is strong and trustworthy: he is the one who elevated Jesus to the throne of grace.

And this same God who raised Jesus into heaven, will also raise us who belong to him, for where the Head of the church is, there the Body will soon follow.

We might live our whole life, and never much find any fame. We might live out every day God grants to us, and never once rise very high in glory. Indeed, we might live through entire seasons of life cast down in spirit, struggling with depression, filled with self-doubts, doing the best we can to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves, but with no one, as it were, caring one whit about us, no one much noticing our labors, no one giving us much encouragement. Indeed, we might become so accustomed to the doldrums and to the neglect of others that we might imagine that there is no cure for it, that we will never be flying aloft in this world.

But if such disheartening thoughts should sometimes beset you, reflect that it was *God* who elevated Jesus to his right hand, and it is this same God who is well able to elevate you — elevate you not only in outward circumstances, but also raise up your heart and your spirit too, so that you will be happy in heaven with our ascended Lord Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.