

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/4/2016, Ascension Eve
Luke 24:44-53

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

⁵¹While he [Jesus] blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven. ⁵²And they returned to Jerusalem *with great joy...*

Why joy? Why were the apostles filled with joy at the Ascension of Jesus? You would think that they would be sad about it, to be parted from their Master. You would think they would be left lonely at his Ascension. Why, then, joy? The answer, I believe, is that Jesus is not simply departing from his disciples. If he were, they would have reason to be left desolate, to be separated from such a good and kind Lord. But the Ascension of Jesus does not mark the *departing* of Jesus so much as it marks what is called his “session.” That is, the Ascension of Jesus means that Jesus now sits “at the right hand of God the Father.” *All* authority now belongs to him. In our heart of hearts, I think that sounds right to us. That is how reality should be! The seat of final authority should be filled by that good man Jesus. And it is encouraging to have such a powerful Friend on our side.

That the Ascension of Jesus means that he is now sovereign over the universe is the theme of this evening’s Epistle Lesson from the First Chapter of Ephesians. Listen again to the testimony of St. Paul:

he [the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory] raised him [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; ²²and he has put *all things* under his feet...

This theme about the sovereignty of Jesus struck me last Sunday as I was praying aloud the Great Thanksgiving in the Holy Communion. I must have heard these words a thousand times over the years. You might have too. But *this* time they found a special place in my mind and in my heart and they lift me up. The words occur in that part of the prayer where we are remembering Jesus. They speak of the “seat of power”:

- ☐ Therefore, O God, with this bread and cup we remember the incarnation of your Son: his human birth and the covenant he made with us. We remember the sacrifice of his life: his eating with outcasts and sinners, and his acceptance of death. But chiefly on this

day we remember his rising from the tomb, *his ascension to the seat of power*, and his sending of the holy and life-giving Spirit...

This is my theme this evening: We belong to the One who has ascended to the seat of all power.

I have admitted this before: I used to regret the Ascension of Jesus. I used to regret it deeply. I figured that if Jesus lived somewhere on this earth, I would be glad to save up all my money and make a pilgrimage to that place and to stand in line for the longest time to actually meet Jesus. That would do my heart good!

But there are problems with this scheme. Bit by bit I have come to understand that. For one thing, I have responsibilities where I am, right here at Immanuel Lutheran Church in New York City. I do not have a sabbatical. I have never felt free to simply leave things behind and head off on a pilgrimage. Going to the Holy Land and standing in a long line to speak with Jesus would thrill me, no doubt, but also I would be worrying a bit about my church and family back home. I mean, it might well be an awfully long line waiting to meet and to have pastoral conversation with Jesus. The pilgrimage could take a long time.

Second, my heart goes out to the many people who could not afford to make the pilgrimage. They just do not have enough money. Not everyone in America travels to foreign lands. Many folks are just scraping by.

But besides these practical matters, there is also this matter of power and authority. If Jesus had not ascended to the right hand of the Father and taken his place in the seat of power, his presence on earth might not be *enough* in face of the troubles this world faces.

The Gospel is the good news that Jesus lives. You have heard me say that many times. It is the foundation of my preaching all these years. It was the foundation of the preaching of the apostles. The primitive apostolic proclamation was that Jesus, though he had died a horrible death on the cross, nonetheless lives again, with death behind him. And if death is *behind* Jesus, then his will is going to prevail. His will shall prevail because, what can stop him? He is able to go on working at the things on his heart without that terrible barrier we face. He does not face death — the great destroyer of our hopes and dreams — and so eventually he will make this world right — the way he wants it to be. We can count on it. We can bank on it.

The problem is that if he does not have *power* adequate to his goodness, then those powers that oppose him can go on doing damage for a long time to come. Sin, death, and the devil are forces to be reckoned with. What we need is that Jesus should be both good *and* great. The Ascension of our Lord means that Jesus is both! He is both good and great. Ascension means that every other power on earth must in the end yield to the will of Jesus.

So I imagine that the disciples left the Ascension with some joy in their hearts because it meant that their labors were not hopeless. The apostles had some important work to do. They had just received their commission from Jesus:

⁴⁷...repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to *all* nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:47-48, RSV)

This godly assignment was so vast that it is hard to imagine how they could accomplish it. But the Ascension of Jesus means that they are laboring on the right side of things. They are throwing in their strength on the side of the all powerful One -- the One before whom every other authority and power on earth will ultimately bow. They are not toiling for that which perishes. They are not spending their strength uselessly. Instead, they are working for that which lasts. They are contributing, in whatever measure they are able, to a good and successful project. They are helping to build up the Kingdom of God.

The Ascension of Jesus means that he is crowned with many crowns. It means that he is the most important factor to be taken into account. I am talking about plain common sense. I am talking about rationality. If all kingdoms, dominions, and names that can be named are beneath him, then he is the One we are to serve above all others.

The apostles in this evening's reading had witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus. Maybe they stood afar off, for fear of the crowd, but they all knew that Jesus had been crucified. On that Cross, Jesus died a brutal, appalling death. And behind the Cross lies the immense power of the Roman Empire — that Empire forged by Julius Caesar. But the Ascension says No to that empire. The Ascension says, Mind Jesus even more than you mind the Roman Empire. And in that conviction, the apostles had courage to go out and win the world to Christ — as many people in this world as are willing.

Again, the Ascension says no to the Third Reich. We honor Bonhoeffer and a comparative handful of similar disciples because they believed the Ascension rather than Hitler. They believe that Jesus occupies the seat of power, not Hitler, not even with all his armies and all his awful ways.

The Ascension comforts and orients us in face of the most awful and traumatic experiences we might have to face. The Ascension says, do not let those awful experiences exercise tyranny over you. Do not let trauma ruin your life. Do not give it final power in your life, for that final power belongs to Jesus. Jesus alone is the BIG DEAL for us. He alone is the One to live for. Jesus alone is the One to be preoccupied with. Jesus alone is the One who should count in our lives. He is the One who is crowned with many crowns. Let him wear a crown in our life too. Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.” Let us not bow down before lesser powers and authorities, temptations and traumas, but rather go forth to serve our good Lord and Master, the One who is ascended to the seat of power, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.