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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
May 12, 2024
Sunday after Ascension
(Previously preached on May 13, 2018)

Scripture Lessons: Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53
Hymns: 212; 738; 213; 409:4

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord
and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Ephesians 1:16-23

¹⁶ “I do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, ¹⁸ the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power ²⁰ which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated *Him* at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, ²¹ far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.

²² And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, our risen and ascended Lord, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Ascension Day --

In the ancient church Ascension Day was treated as one of the three most significant days of the church year, on an equal footing with Christmas and Easter. Now most Christians didn't give it a thought that last Thursday was Ascension Day. Can you imagine going through Christmas or Easter without giving a thought to the spiritual significance of the day? Maybe I shouldn't go there. Maybe we should instead focus on the reason why the early church placed so much importance on observing the ascension of our Lord, as much as observing Jesus' birth and resurrection.

In simple terms, the significance of the event points to the completion of a specific portion of Jesus' mission of salvation. The Son of God was sent down to earth by God the Father, sent with a mission to save lost mankind. So He became our brother, taking on our flesh and blood that He might serve as our substitute. He did this both in fulfilling the law of God and taking upon Himself the curse of the law. This was Christ's mission of redemption. He paid the price for our sin in His sufferings and death. His resurrection proclaimed the success of that act of love. We are justified. So then His ascension, in its most basic message, declared that Jesus, as both the Son of God and the Son of Man, returned to heaven with the **mission** of redemption **accomplished**.

However, that is only the tip of the iceberg of the truth and power of the ascension, and its impact upon our salvation. May the Spirit enlighten our understanding of --

THEME: The Power of Christ as Our Ascended Lord.

Let us first consider --

I. His Power in our Hearts and Lives.

There are certain things that Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians to receive which come to us also because of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Near the opening of our text, we read the words of Paul's prayer for them, and so also for us. He prayed that

“ the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him,¹⁸ the eyes of your understanding being enlightened.”

(Ephesians 1:17-18)

As our exalted Lord, Jesus grants us the spirit of wisdom and revelation. This is not saying that Jesus talks to us in an extra-biblical revelation as some enthusiasts might say as they exclaim: “I just received a word from the Lord!” No, what is laid out for us in our text is exactly what Luke was explaining in our gospel lesson. *“And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.⁴⁶ Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day,⁴⁷ and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.⁴⁸ And you are witnesses of these things.”* (Luke 24:45-48)

As we read the Scriptures we understand the gospel. That is the blessing of the spirit of wisdom given us by the Lord. We understand that Christ Jesus came into the world to take our sins upon Himself, and to suffer and die for us. We rejoice in the wonder of the cross, and how the precious blood of Christ was poured out for the sins of the world, for the sins of the **whole** world. We don't possess this understanding because we are so smart. It is because the Spirit of Christ has opened our understanding to the gospel. This gospel, which found its culmination in Jesus' ascension to the right hand of God, is **the** message that saves souls.

Even as it was necessary for Jesus to suffer and die and rise again, so it continues to be necessary for this gospel to be proclaimed to all the world. Jesus would have us, you and me, *who have had our understanding of the Scriptures opened by the Lord*, take on this task. What a glorious mission and purpose is set before us by our exalted and ascended Lord. You see, faith is not just knowing the life story of Jesus, but it is also comprehending the blessings of salvation that it brings to undeserving sinners like us. Paul references these blessings in these words: *“That you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.”* (Ephesians 1:18b)

Knowing the hope of His calling is significant in the life of the child of God. We live in a very material world that puts far too much emphasis on the things of this world. Accordingly, the hope that people have for life is often wrapped up in health and happiness, and security in terms of money and big houses, and secure relationships. We all hope for these things. What if you don't have health? What if you don't have a great deal of money? What if the relationship you're in falls apart and you are hurt? What about facing the death of a loved one? These are all common occurrences in people's lives! If our hope and happiness is fixed on the temporal and the material it is fragile, indeed it is vanity.

The hope of His calling directs our eyes upward, to the calling of God in heaven above. Our life is hidden with Christ in God, as Paul also wrote to the Colossians: "*Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.*" (Colossians 3:2-4)

Now, you may ask, "How does this connects to Jesus' ascension?" The answer is much in every way! Remember that Jesus ascended *visibly* into heaven. Jesus ascended *physically* into heaven. Jesus ascended not only as the Son of God returning to His native home, but also as the Son of Man, as our brother. He will return in glory visibly, physically, as He went up into heaven. His ascension was the first-fruits of many. First-fruits are not only the first but the best, **and** a taste of things to come.

The hope of our calling, the hope of the inheritance that we have in Jesus as our ascended Lord, is that we too shall ascend into heaven. Now, in this time, while we wait for the Lord's appearing, we face the specter of death and the grave which seem so final and so *hopeless*. However, we know and believe that when we die our souls go to God who gave them, and our bodies rest in the ground **in this hope** of the resurrection **to ascend** to heaven. The hope of resurrection is as real as Jesus' resurrection. The accompanying hope of ascension to glory **is as real as Jesus' ascension**.

This is the inheritance which has been secured for us in Christ. This is the hope of our Christian life that is ours through faith in

Jesus, our ascended Lord. We also read in the epistle to the Hebrews: “*Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.*”³ *And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*” (Hebrews 3:2-3)

Yes, it is a challenge for any and every child of God to shun the sin of this world even as it appeals so strongly to our flesh. We look at the world and we see chaos, and the appearance of the wicked prospering, and one wonders if it wouldn’t just be easier to go along with the world. Without doubt it would be easier in a lot of ways, but not in the ways that really count. But what are we to make of the chaos and evil in the world? We need to understand that the chaos and evil of this world do NOT mean that the Lord has lost control of what’s going on in this world. It does reveal the vanity and the futility of life in this world. The truth regarding the majesty of Jesus’ ascension assures us that our Redeemer Lord is always absolutely in charge.

In our text we are told of --

II. His Rule Over All for His Church.

Let us consider this point by point, for this is truly amazing and yet so easy for us to overlook or forget. We are to know –“*What is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power.*” (Ephesians 1:19)

“*The exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe,*” (v.19) might bring His miracles to mind, but this is something greater. When we are struggling in life and worry or grief or tribulation or persecution seem to overwhelm us, it is hard to remember that Jesus is in charge, with great power toward us who believe! It is hard for us to endure sickness and distress and loss without wondering if the Lord has lost control of what’s going on in our individual lives. It is hard to comprehend the promise “*We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.*” (Romans 8:28) Our flesh cries out, “If this is the Lord working for my good, I don’t want to know what bad would be!” We forget that all is according to **His purpose**, His **eternal** purpose for us in heaven,

and not **our** purpose, which is often our shallow short-sighted purposes centered in this life.

Yes, it is with great power that Jesus as our ascended Lord directs all things in our lives to bring us closer to Him, and closer to the glory that He has reserved for us in heaven. Yes, it is with great power that Jesus watches over us and cares for us and indeed does deliver us from every evil, so that throughout this life we actually remain His children and heirs of eternal life.

God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has our good in mind and heart all through our lives, and He has positioned Jesus our brother in the place of majesty and power to watch over and care for us. This was incorporated in God's gospel plan for our salvation.

Our text teaches us: *“which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. ²² And He put all things under His feet.”* (Ephesians 1:20-22a)

In Philippians chapter two we are told of how Jesus humbled Himself and became obedient to the Father's will, obedient to the point of death, even the shameful, painful death of the cross. It was according to His Father's will for our salvation. As a result of this sacrifice, we are saved. In response to this great sacrifice God the Father exalted Jesus and gave Him the name which is above every name. Yes, the name “Jesus” is the name that is above every name. At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow. This isn't vanity. This isn't an empty gesture that doesn't mean anything in the end. This is entrusting to Jesus, **also according to His human nature**, divine power and majesty. That is what Jesus possesses right now as He has been placed at the right hand of God the Father almighty.

We know God is spirit, and so as a spirit He doesn't literally have a right hand as we do, as Jesus does. This is an expression that we earthbound humans understand, informing us of the power entrusted to Jesus. God has placed all things **under His feet**. We may not understand that expression quite as well. It doesn't only

mean that all things are lower than Jesus; it indicates that Jesus is **triumphant** over all things on this earth. Jesus owns the victory and has brought this world into subjection.

And so our text concludes: *(God) gave Him to be head over all things to the church,* ²³ *which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.*” (Ephesians 1:22b-23)

We are not so good at seeing the big picture, and exactly how all things come together. Jesus sees the big picture. He knows the end of all things. He understands how things will turn out, and that they will turn out for the advancement of His kingdom on earth, that is for the salvation of souls. Jesus is in control of all things for the good of His Church. We are His Church, along with all those who believe wherever they may be. Jesus is in control of all things for the good of His Church, the assembly of all believers. For Jesus that is not a small thing for which He has little time or concern. No, this is the focus of Jesus’ love and attention. There is a connection between us and our ascended Lord Jesus Christ. He is the head, and we are His body. Anything that would hurt us hurts Him. Anything that would harm His Church would harm Him and would also diminish the working of His will for salvation, and the advancement of the cause of His kingdom. That can’t happen. Jesus won’t allow it to happen.

Knowing Jesus’ ascension was and is the assumption of the throne of power to rule the world for the good of His Church, we are emboldened to advance the gospel in this world. We are confident that as the Lord opens doors of opportunity, He will accompany us as He promised in the great commission: He is and will be with us always, even to the end of the age! (Matthew 28:20)

Jesus is our ascended and exalted Lord. Indeed, this is cause for joy and rejoicing. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!

AMEN.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans15:13)