

Sermon on Luke 24:50-53; Matthew 28:16-19
CCRC, 12 May 2024
Rev. Tom Bomhof
“Experiencing Ascension”

Dear Friends of God,

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In the quiet space under the impressive dome of the Basilica di San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice is an art installation called Ascension. The piece is by British sculptor Anish Kapoor, who also created The Bean in Chicago and a three-story stainless-steel sculpture called Sky Mirror in New York City. The silence of that space is broken by a sudden rushing sound and a turbulent blast of air. Smoke begins to pour from the centre of the base, twisting as it goes, ascending towards a vent high in the dome. You cannot help but look up and feel amazed.

In naming the work Ascension, Kapoor was inspired by Jesus’ last moments on earth, as Luke’s gospel describes,

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While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Luke 23:51

We often wonder what that looked like. How did Jesus ascend? What did it look like to see him float upwards into the clouds? We can only use our imagination. Over the centuries, artists often gave literal depictions of what it could have looked like. (*St. Mark’s Cathedral, Venice; *Rembrandt)

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But Kapoor’s Ascension helps get at what it might have felt like. It conveys an abstract, yet uniquely challenging experience of the Ascension. Art critic Meryl Doney describes the experience this way:

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...visitors to the Basilica stand, as Jesus’ disciples would have stood, gazing upwards. Their different expressions and body language mark the individuality of each reaction. In the cathedral, as on the Mount of Olives, something strange and unprecedented is being witnessed. Immaterial smoke has become a twisting, rising column. Because of its very size and materiality the piece evokes a powerful sense of upward movement and force, capturing for the individual onlooker something of the sense of awe and mystery that must have overwhelmed those first disciples. Meryl Doney

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I would love to go see this installation some time. I’d love to experience that lifting of eyes and of souls upward to heaven that this piece of art evokes. I think it would be moving.

Yet, as cool as that experience would be, we already have an experience of the ascension. We who come after those disciples, who did not see Jesus ascend into heaven, who only live with the story and the mystery of it, do have a powerful experience of the ascension.

For one thing, we experience joy.

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Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

The disciples did not leave the scene heart-broken. No fear, no cowering in an upper room, no disorientation, confusion, or grief. This was not a sad moment for them. They left with joy. And not just a toe-tapping, head nodding joy. They had great joy. It was body-moving, life-giving, full-on joy.

We still experience joy because Christ has risen. We still experience life-giving joy in our hearts and make worship a big part our life because Jesus is king.

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On August 22, 1741, George Friedric Handel began a new composition that would try to capture the life of Christ in all the emotion of its gospel presentation. Twenty-four days later he laid down his pen. The Messiah was finished!

Little messages in the margins of his original manuscript give a glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of the musical genius as he feverishly penned the lines and scrawled the notes. At the closing bar of the famous "Hallelujah" chorus, Handel simply wrote,

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"I think I did see all heaven before me, and the Great God himself."

The reality of Jesus our king moves us to stand and join in singing "Hallelujah", for the Lord God omnipotent reigns. We lose ourselves and our fears and are filled with joy and peace as we worship our king. We start a chorus that will ring throughout the universe some day: Christ is king. And every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. How wonderful to say it joyfully, thankfully, worshipfully.

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We also experience the confidence that the ascension brings.

The ascension marks the ending of Jesus' ministry on earth. All that he had set out to do found its completion as Jesus was lifted on that cloud and brought back triumphant into heaven. All that he had taken on when he came to be born in Bethlehem, began his ministry in Nazareth, called his disciples, revealed the heart of God through miracles and teaching, and all that he had resolutely gone to Jerusalem to do—the sorrow, the betrayal, the injustice, the crucifixion, the burial, the resurrection, the defeat of the curse of death—was accomplished. Jesus completed his project of salvation; he did his part in the grand story of redemption that was already started in the Garden of Eden. He did not fail. There was nothing left for him to accomplish in his earthly ministry. Ascension is the climax of Jesus' work. He has now been taken up into heaven in victory. Jesus finished well.

That gives us spiritual confidence. We have a saviour who did the job, who completed his work, who saved us body and soul, in life and in death. Everything we needed him to do, he did. He

was our perfect saviour, fully human, fully divine, who gave himself once and for all as our perfect substitute for sin.

We are redeemed, in his death and resurrection we have life. We now have a renewed relationship with our heavenly Father through his completed work on this earth. No more sacrifices have to be made because Christ's is complete; once and for all. No more revelation has to be made because Christ has revealed God completely. The ascension declares that Christ has finished well.

In the Book of Revelation we get a heavenly perspective on what happened. We see a Lamb who was slain receive the power and authority of heaven. After the opening of the seven seals and the sounding of the seven trumpets, the loud voices of heaven said,

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The kingdom of the world has become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah
and he shall reign for ever and ever. Revelation 12:15

Jesus was received into heaven and was crowned with glory. He was seated at the right hand of God and is now the reigning king over all the earth. All authority has been given to him.

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That gives us confidence as we face hardship in this life. It helped Stephen as he faced becoming the first martyr of the Christian church.

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But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." Acts 7:55-56

Stephen could face his horrible persecution and martyrdom with confidence because he saw the ascended Lord in heaven. When feel weak in ourselves, knowing that Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth gives us the courage we need to accomplish our mission, even if it is dying for our faith.

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Romans 8 tells us something more about what this means.

Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Romans 8:34

Jesus is in heaven for our good. His ministry there provides us forgiveness, grace, transformation and everything we need for body and soul. We can have confidence that our prayers are heard, and that they are effective. Jesus will hear us and will act for our good.

Hebrews 4 speaks of the confidence we have because our Lord ascended to heaven:

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Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:16

The ascension gives us the certainty that we have a friend in heaven. His work there includes representing us before the throne of God. We now have our flesh and blood in heaven, representing us, standing in for us, pleading our cause for us.

That is going to be a great thing when we face our judge at the end of time. Our friend in will also be our judge. We will stand before the judge who is the very one who gave himself for us. We have no fear of that day. Jesus' ascension turns dooms day into confidence day. His forgiveness sets us free for eternal life.

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We experience so much spiritual confidence because of Christ's ascension: confidence in his finished work on earth, confidence in his authority, and confidence in his glorious work on our behalf in heaven.

Not only do we experience confidence, we also experience his presence.

Jesus is true to his promise:

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And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

He had earlier told his disciples,

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But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. John 16:7

And that's exactly what happened on the Day of Pentecost, ten days after Jesus' ascension. The Spirit descended on the church with power, inaugurating a new age in the history of salvation.

And so they could be joyful. Their hearts could be filled with praise. They could worship with glad hearts. They were not left alone. Their Lord was with them.

As Paul says in those deeply assuring words,

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For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 8:38-39

I have heard these words recited by God's people in so many different situations. Mostly in difficult times. When they face hard news; when the doctors have said they can't do anything more; when they are afraid, when they are troubled. And I have seen the strength that these

words bring. They have a saviour from whom they will never be separated. His presence is with them in their living and their dying.

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And finally, we not only experience joy, confidence and his presence, we also experience longing and hope.

Luke moves us to hope when he writes,

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They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." Acts 1:10-11

We long for Christ's return. We long for the day when he comes back and his victory is consummated, when our flesh and blood will in fact be resurrected to heaven and when the last enemy – death – is destroyed.

Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 1 Corinthians 15:24-26

Jesus must return again to finally complete the work of restoring the world and its people. When he returns, his victory will finally be complete. Right now we are in between the ascension and the final return.

The ascension creates a longing for Jesus's return. It reminds us his reign is "already" but "not yet."

It also gives us hope. The world isn't going to end in a smouldering ruin. Jesus will descend in the way he ascended. Bad times will be over for good, evil will have lost, the darkness will lift, and everything sad will at last come untrue.

These are the ways we experience the power of the ascension today: confidence, presence, yearning and hope. The ascension is good news of great joy.

And today we get to experience the ascension as we take the bread and cup of communion. We lift our hearts up to the risen Lord and we receive his very life within us. In the mystery that is communion, we experience to power, the confidence, the joy, the yearning and the hope that comes because Jesus ascended into heaven. He is with us always.

Let us pray: Almighty God, we have seen something of your greatness and glory, your sovereign power and eternal purpose all expressed so wonderfully in Jesus Christ, our Lord, Risen and Ascended.

We thank you for the wonder of Ascension, that marvelous yet mysterious moment in the life of the Apostles which left them gazing heavenwards in confusion yet departing in joy.

We thank you for the way that it brought the earthly ministry of Jesus to a fitting conclusion; signifying his oneness with you, and demonstrating your final seal of approval on all that he had done.

Give us joy, confidence, a sense of your abiding presence, longing and hope that your Ascension can give us today. May we live each day to the glory and honour of our ascended King. Amen.