

A Sermon for Ascension Day
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Today's Gospel reading is from the end of Luke, chapter 24:

And Jesus said to his disciples, these are my words that I have spoken to you while I was still with you. That everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled. And then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures and he said to them, thus it is written that a Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sin is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I'm sending upon you what my Father promised. So stay here in the city until we have been clothed with power from on high. And then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. And while he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven and they worshiped him. And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

The word of the Lord.

A couple of weeks ago I received a denominational journal, in which there was a meditation about Ascension Day. The upshot of the meditation was that the Ascension is the moment when Christ's works become our works. It is the moment when Jesus leaves us, his work done. He has completed all his tasks, and now it is up to us. His legacy is now in our hands—good luck. It seemed that for the writer of this meditation, the Ascension was the expression of Jesus' absence. Jesus has gone, and now we have to figure out what to do next.

What is striking about the New Testament's speaking of Jesus' day of ascension is that, for the first Christian community, that day seems to represent the exact opposite. For the first Christians, Jesus' ascension was not an expression of his absence, but instead an expression of his presence. Just think about the way in which the letter to the Ephesians spoke about Jesus' ascension being his inauguration into the royal throne room, the moment when he is seated at the right hand of God, which is the biblical phrase indicating the place of power. Jesus is seated above all other power, authority, and dominion, and from there he is now ruling all creation and leading creation to its final goal. Jesus is in charge of creation and is present to everything that happens in his creation as he is leading it toward where God wants it to go.

By raising Jesus from the dead, God proclaimed Jesus' victory. The resurrection marks the moment when we celebrate the work that Jesus has done, has completed, and has fulfilled. But in his ascension God declared him Lord of all. A completely new chapter of Jesus' work opens up through his ascension. So for the first Christian community Jesus' ascension does not express that now he is gone. No—he has come near in completely unexpected ways. His power is present everywhere. His work has not ended—no, his work has begun a completely new phase of triumphant leading.

To me the most striking image about the Ascension is that which comes in the above passage from Luke. The writer of the Gospel tells us how Jesus is leading his disciples to Bethany, in the hills, and he raises his hands and he blesses them. And then while he is blessing them—and the Greek is very clear about this—his blessing ends. His work is completed, and he goes away *as* he is blessing them. He ascends to heaven into his blessing—his ascension is an *expression of* his blessing.

Blessing in the Scriptures, certainly in the New Testament, has an astrological flavor. To bless someone is to put that person on the road toward their God-given goal. It leads them into the direction God wants them to go, and this is what Jesus is doing in his ascension. He is blessing his people, leading them toward what God has in mind as the goal of creation. Jesus isn't absent—he is present more than ever. Jesus' work isn't over—it has only just begun.

Of course, saying that raises all kinds of new questions: If Jesus is now raised above all authority in heaven and earth, if he is acting in his power, how exactly is he doing that? How is he leading creation to its final goal? Those questions press themselves all the more upon us when we look around and see that the life of the church doesn't seem at all triumphant or that history is progressing and getting better and better. Institutions we have long relied on look like they're crumbling. Powers we trusted seem to be fleeting away. Dark clouds sometimes seem to overtake history. In the midst of all that, how can we say that Jesus is enacting his power?

With those questions in mind, I was meditating on the text from Ephesians given in today's lectionary readings and was particularly struck by the image in this verse: "And he, God, has put all things under his Jesus' feet, has made him the head of all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all things." Jesus fills all things. It seems to be an important image for the writer of Ephesians, because the image comes back in the fourth chapter. But the writer returns to the notion of ascension and says that he who descended, who became incarnate, is the same as the one who ascended far above the heavens so that he might fill all things (Eph. 4:10). So here the writer says this is exactly why he ascended: so that he would fill all things.

Jesus enacts His power by filling all things, what does that mean? Well, two things struck me about that image. The first is that it's a spatial image, not a temporal image. I think that quite often when we think about an acting of power we think about it along a temporal line. Just a moment ago I voiced what I feel and what many of you also feel that when you look at history right now, it doesn't seem to be progressing very well. That's expressing in the temporal line, it doesn't seem to get better as you might expect. Politicians measure their careers in temporal times. What can I accomplish in the two years I have before the election to that I'll be reelected? Churches and seminaries make strategic plans saying in the next three years what we will accomplish. We measure what happens along a timeline; but not so in the biblical image here. Nowhere in the Ephesians letter does it say that Jesus is enacting this power by year after year, by century after century, progressing towards the kingdom of God. No, He enacts his power by filling all things.

The second thing that struck me about this image is that the filling is in the present tense. It does not say, "He is filling all things more and more and next year it will be a little bit fuller and the century after that will be even fuller." No, he fills all things—present tense. Everything right now is full of the presence of the ascended Lord. All creation is filled by him. Pause for a moment and think about that. Because if that is true, it means that that struggling congregation is no less full of the presence of Jesus Christ than that flourishing one down the street. It means that the presence of Jesus Christ is no less full in the institution that seems to be going under than when it was still flourishing and going strong. It means that Jesus Christ is no less completely filling the current White House as he was filling the White House of predecessors. Every part of creation is full with the presence and power of the ascended Lord.

Now, what does that mean? I'm not sure. And it's exactly the fact that it's Ascension Day which allows me to say that without any anxiety. For if the Ascension gave us, "It's up to us now," then we'd have a

problem, because then we'd need a road map. We'd need to know what to do next. How are we going to fill those big shoes that have been left for us? But if Ascension Day is what the first Christian communities claimed, namely, that Jesus Christ, the living resurrected Lord, is filling all things, it's okay if we don't know exactly what to do with a faltering congregation. And it's okay if we don't know how to respond to crumbling institutions. And it's okay if we don't know where history is going from here, because we know that Jesus Christ is there—that He has made himself a home in every part of his creation.

This is why I believe that Ascension Day is the Christian feast for such a time as this when we find nowhere to go, when we can't quite see the road map. It's okay, because Jesus Christ has been raised and seated at the right hand of God. To him is given all authority in heaven and on earth, and he is filling all things. Glory be to his name. Amen.