



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMON

“He Ascended into Heaven”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 47; Luke 24:44-53

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling Jr.
on May 21, 2023, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church
in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Psalm 47

- ¹ Clap your hands, all you peoples;
shout to God with loud songs of joy.
² For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome,
a great king over all the earth.
³ He subdued peoples under us,
and nations under our feet.
⁴ He chose our heritage for us,
the pride of Jacob whom he loves.

Selah

- ⁵ God has gone up with a shout,
the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.
⁶ Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
⁷ For God is the king of all the earth;
sing praises with a psalm.^d

⁸ God is king over the nations;
God sits on his holy throne.
⁹ The princes of the peoples gather
as the people of the God of Abraham.
For the shields of the earth belong to God;
he is highly exalted.

Luke 24:44-53

The Walk to Emmaus

44 Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke 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.”
⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written that the Messiah^b is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses^f of these things. ⁴⁹And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in

the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

The Ascension of Jesus

50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.^g ⁵²And they worshiped him, and^h returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³and they were continually in the temple blessing God.ⁱ

He Ascended into Heaven

We say it every Sunday ... “He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty,” but what does that mean? And is it really that important?

On the scale of important things that Jesus did in his life, the ascension is not especially high on most people’s list.

If I were to ask you this morning what was the most important thing Jesus ever did, some might say ... the fact that he was born in the first place. That the very word ... the word that was with God in the beginning ... that it became flesh and dwelled among us ... that the incarnate God of the universe chose to be swaddled in a blanket ... that is incredible!

Given how important Christmas is to us culturally ... it’s no wonder that many people would choose Christmas. For me personally, and for what it means to my family, given our phase of life with our children, and just the overall joy of the season, it probably won’t surprise anyone to hear that Christmas is my favorite time of the year ... but is it the most important theologically?

There are a few who might say that Jesus’ baptism was the most important thing he did ... never asking us to do something he wasn’t willing to do himself ... identifying with us. I doubt someone would say the Transfiguration, but that was no small occasion either, when it became clear that Jesus – standing there atop a mountain and with Moses and Elijah – that he was the fulfilment of all they stood for – the fulfilment of all the law and all the prophets.

Of course, most would say the blood – the cross – Jesus’ work of atoning for our sins ... as if he took an invoice for the debt of our sins and nailed it to that tree saying, “paid in full.” That’s the most important thing Jesus ever did, some would undoubtedly say!

But then there’s the resurrection ... when on that third day – and when the world thought that Jesus was dead and gone – he got up with life in him again ... just as he said he would do; ah, and that seemingly invincible power of sin and death ... it was overcome. It was destroyed.

“Where O death is your victory, when death, is your sting?” Of, the victory of our Lord, Jesus Christ, - it broke that stinger right off.

The Apostle Paul put it this way: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins.” Indeed, the resurrection ... THE resurrection – that’s the most important thing Jesus did.

But what about the ascension? If we are honest with ourselves, we don't talk a great deal about the ascension. May 18 was Ascension of the Lord Day, and every year, just like clockwork – some 40 days after Easter comes ... the ascension (which was Thursday) ... and for most of us that day probably came and went without even a passing glance toward the theological importance of the day.

Thursday, we went to the grocery store ... we met some friends ... we had an end-of-the-year party at school ... but the ascension?

This morning I want us to look at the incredible significance of Jesus' ascension, because, quite frankly, Jesus' messianic mission would not be complete without it!

We know from our New Testament lesson that after the ascension there was great joy on the part of Jesus' followers, and they were continually about the business of worshipping and praising God ...

And when we look at Luke's second volume ... the Book of Acts ... we find that there in the beginning, Luke is still emphasizing the story of the ascension. In Acts 1, beginning with verse 9, we read:

"... as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

"They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'"

It is not surprising to read that there was some gawking going on, some astonishment ... I mean, Jesus is caught up in a glorious way and literally taken into heaven. Who wouldn't strain their eyes to see him until, at last, like a speck, Jesus seems to disappear?

"Well, don't just stand there," the angels essentially say. "Get to it ..." And they do! But do we?

Does what we have read this morning have the effect of putting a hop in our step? Does it inspire joy? Does it, by God's grace, incline us to worship God? And if not, why?

"Why/" is a good question. It is a good place to start. And perhaps, we would be most wise to ask that question of the ascension itself. Why did it happen?

We know that a few other people have ascended into heaven ... Enoch, Elijah ... they, too, went up into heaven. But there's something different about Jesus' ascension.

When the Bible says that, "He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things" ... when the Bible says that, it is telling us that there was something profoundly unique about Jesus' ascension.

That for having descended in the way that Jesus did – from heaven having come down ... Emmanuel ... God with us ... that for having done that, Jesus and only Jesus is in a position to now ascent in order to fulfil all things.

So, there's something fulfilled. Something accomplished. Something that no one else has ever done and no one else could ever do, save Jesus, the Christ!

(pause)

Now, as we begin to unpack this at a very basic level, we need to first acknowledge that the ascension was, for Jesus, a homecoming!

Some of you may have heard that pastor and author Tim Keller has been very sick and is near death. His family sent out the following message on social media: "In prayer, (dad) said two nights ago, 'I'm thankful for all the people who've prayed for me over the years. I'm thankful for my family, that loves me. I'm thankful for the time God has given me. But I'm ready to see Jesus. I can't wait to see Jesus. Send me home.'" Of course, home can be a physical residence but this morning I find myself thinking about his statement theologically.

For praise be to God, heaven is for us a home. It is that blessed dwelling place that has been prepared for us by our Savior who has promised to, one day, take us to himself.

That said, our going to heaven is by no means the perfect example of a homecoming. What I mean is this ... we did not exist there before we came here! Here is where God formed our inward parts, knitting us together in our mother's womb. In other words, our life on this earth was not preexisted by a life in heaven ...

Ah, but for Jesus, heaven is where he has always existed ... it is where Jesus belongs ... and so, for Jesus to ascent to heaven is, in fact, for him to go home!

Nevertheless, Jesus was here, and he was here for a purpose. And that purpose – that purpose is what makes his going home so significant!

We know that part of the purpose is so that he can sit at the right hand of God – the place of honor – the place of highest favor – right beside his heavenly Father! And that from that place – at the very right hand of God – Jesus has Lordship over heaven and earth! When this happens, Jesus assumes, "The throne of his (ancestor) David." He fulfills the ancient prophecies and takes his rightful place as the eternal King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. It is his coronation!

Many of us watched the coronation of King Charles III on television – and we may have asked ourselves, "Well, wasn't Charles essentially the King when his mother, the Queen, died back on September 8th? I suppose at some level he was. But he wasn't. He still had to be coronated.

Friends, when Jesus ascends into heaven, that is his crowning. His inauguration. His coronation. We here today, we don't wait for Jesus to rule in righteousness. He is already doing it!

And the establishment of that throne, which had been talked about for centuries ... Jesus was not going to be there if he was here. He would not have all things placed beneath his feet if his feet were still walking some dusty road to Emmaus.

Jesus had to go home because that is the place from which he now rules for all eternity!

And not just as King, mind you, but also as our Great High Priest. Indeed, he is the one who is different from all the rest, for he is a priest after the order of Melchizedek and who is a priest forever.

Oh, earthly High Priests, they come and go ... they enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, and they present their sacrifices to God. But our hearts are never changed. Not like how Jeremiah prophesied they would be changed.

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

Friends, such is the work of Jesus Christ who ascended into heaven and who now sits at the right hand of God, and who rules not only as a King, but also serves as our most glorious and Great High Priest.

And in this way, we don't need another one. To be certain, no earthly High Priest will ever be required again ... for when Jesus rises from the grave and ascends into heaven ... he enters into that heavenly temple ... and he tears the veil. He effectively removes the separation that exists between us and God once and for all, but he doesn't stop there. He provides a continual intercession!

And how does Jesus do that we may ask? Well, he does so from his throne. Because whenever God sees our sin, and justice is what we deserve ... God just looks to his right and he sees his son. And he sees the scars. He sees that Jesus has done it. He has paid the price!

That is Jesus' intercession ... a very eternal witness to his atoning work on the cross, all of which is forever evident by virtue of Jesus being there, being present, seated on his throne ... at the very right hand of God.

The Revelation according to John expresses a lovely picture of Jesus at his rightful place in heaven. He describes it like this: “Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders. They numbered myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice ... ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’

“Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, ‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!’”

For his sacrifice – for being the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world – for his ascension and his reign from heaven – for all that Jesus was and is and will forever be, to him be all glory and honor ... now and forever more. Amen!

*The above sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.