

‘DON’T JUST STAND THERE’

Ephesians 1:15-23

In Scripture the number forty is often associated with fullness or completeness. Forty days of rain during the flood. Forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Forty-year kingships of David and Solomon. A forty-day temptation of Jesus by the devil.

And so for forty days after His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples. He appeared to them individually and collectively; behind locked doors and on the shore of Lake Galilee; during the morning and evening; in small groups and, according to 1 Corinthians 15:6, **“to more than five hundred of the brothers at one time.”**

Jesus made these many appearances to prove that He was not a ghost or hallucination or wishful thinking, but rather the risen and victorious Lord. **“After His suffering,”** wrote Luke in Acts 1:3, **“He showed Himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive.”** When the forty days were ended, Jesus led His disciples to the Mount of Olives. And there, according to the reliable witness of Scripture, Jesus **“was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight,”** Acts 1:9.

It’s easy to imagine how the disciples reacted on this occasion; how they must have squinted and shielded their eyes from the sun and strained for a final, parting glimpse of Jesus. And as the disciples stared into the heavens, suddenly, two angels stood among them and asked this question: **“Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?”** Acts 1:11.

The implications of this question were that the disciples should not have been standing there, frightened, worried, hopeless, lonely, sorrowful, or grieving—not if they understood the true significance of the Lord’s ascension. As the angels said, **“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 1:11. And in the interim, faith would be the means to go on seeing Jesus beyond the cloud. Faith.

Notice the similarity to what Paul prayed for the Ephesians; namely, that the “eyes of their heart,” not the eyes in their head, would be illuminated to see the realities of who they were and what they possessed in Jesus Christ. **“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better,”** Ephesians 1:17. In particular, Paul prayed that the Ephesians would be able to see three important realities: true hope, true inheritance, and true power, each connected to the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven.

‘Don’t just stand there,’ the angels told the disciples. This is excellent advice for us too. For if we don’t see beyond the cloud that hid Jesus from sight; that is, if we don’t see Jesus Christ ruling supreme over every aspect of the world and every element in our lives and every detail of our congregation, we too may “just stand there” in worry, uncertainty, weakness, and despair—unwilling to take one more step or endure one more day or make one more effort.

Does this sound like you or someone you know? If so, understand the solution. The solution is to better know God and His word; more precisely, **“the hope to which He has called you,”** verse 18; **“the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints,”** verse 18; and **“His incomparably great power for us who believe,”** verse 19.

Why do we need to know these realities better? Because we too easily forget them or overlook them. We too easily allow the problems and burdens of our lives to hide Jesus from our sight. We look to God for help, yet see nothing but empty skies—like Nikita Khrushchev, who said of Yuri Gagarin, a Russian cosmonaut and the first man in space: “Gagarin flew into space, but didn’t see any god there.”

“He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” We confess these words almost every Sunday. Yet, what do the words mean to us? Does the ascension of Jesus mean that He deserted us? Does “sitting at the right hand of the Father” mean that Jesus is sitting on a literal throne, worn out by the work of redemption? “Whew, glad all that redemption stuff is over. I’m exhausted. I need a long vacation. You guys are on your own.”

At times, the ascension of Jesus seems like an interesting, but almost anti-climactic event; a footnote compared to the other major events in the life of Christ: His incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Consider this in terms of the Apostolic Creed. **“Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.”** In the historic church calendar, these two phrases typically cover four weeks of Advent, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, two Sundays after Christmas, and six Sundays in Epiphany, culminating with the Transfiguration of Jesus.

Or, **“Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead.”** In the historic church calendar, these four phrases cover up to six Sundays in Lent; Ash Wednesday, Maunday Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday, and potentially seven Sundays after Easter.

Then, **“He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there He will come to judge the living and the dead.”** How much time is devoted to the Ascension of Jesus in the historic church calendar? Generally an Ascension Day

service, though this seldom happens any longer because Ascension Day falls forty days after Easter Day and that means a Thursday; and, well, Thursday is a weekday, and weekday services are difficult to attend, especially when driving great distances. So we typically celebrate the Ascension on the Sunday following Ascension Day, if we celebrate the Ascension at all.

I wonder what happened. I wonder what changed. I wonder why the Christian Church over the centuries became less and less enthusiastic about celebrating the Ascension. This was certainly not the perspective of the early Christian Church. Do you know when the first Ascension Day service was held? On the first Ascension Day. And that first service was filled with joy, as we're told in Luke 24. **"While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God,"** Luke 24:51-53.

Think about that. The same disciples who only forty days earlier had been too afraid to spend time outside of a locked room, were now continually and publicly worshipping Jesus in the very same city in which Jesus had been crucified. Why? How? Because they understood the meaning of the Lord's ascension. They realized that the same Jesus who still had the nail-prints in His hands and feet and the spear-thrust in His side; the same Jesus who had cared for them, died for them, and redeemed them was now exercising all power in heaven and on earth on their behalf and our behalf and for the purpose of carrying out every detail of His grand and glorious redemptive plan. This is why they were rejoicing. This is why they no longer "just stood there" gaping into heaven. By faith they saw these three great realities: **true hope, true inheritance, and true power.** These are the three great realities we need to see too.

First, understand better the true hope to which God has called you. Do you know that hope? Are you living in that hope? I don't need to tell you how hopeless this world is apart from Jesus Christ. You can see the hopelessness in the faces of certain people you may know or strangers you may meet. People who've been beaten up and torn down by the heartaches and difficulties of life: divorce, debt, illness, job loss. You can read about hopelessness in any newspaper or coroner's report or suicide statistics.

When prominent people take their own life, we all pause, shake our heads, and wonder what could lead individuals of such privilege and wealth to commit suicide. The answer in many cases is hopelessness. Did you know that suicide is the leading cause of death for young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four; that every one hundred minutes, a teenager takes his own life; that globally more than a million people commit suicide each year; or that suicides have increased by sixty-percent over the last forty-five years?

What would each of us be apart from Jesus Christ? Paul provides the answer in Ephesians 2:12, saying, **"Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ,**

excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

Yet, even as Christians—and remember, Paul was writing to Christians; to **“the faithful in Christ Jesus,”** Ephesians 1:1—we can feel hopeless at times; our view of Jesus obstructed by dark, ominous clouds of problems or worries. Tell me, are we really living in hope when we make statements like, “I don’t expect anything good to happen to me in life. It never does.” Or, “I don’t know if I can deal with this problem one more day.” Or, “I don’t know if God will work this situation out for my benefit.”

Yes, you do know. As a Christian you do know. **You simply need to know better.** The proper prayer under such circumstances is Paul’s prayer: “Lord, let me know You better. Lord, send Your Holy Spirit to open the eyes of my heart so that I may know the hope to which You have called me. Hope I would never know apart from You.”

Regardless of your circumstances today, whether you are waiting for the results of a medical test; or lying in a hospital bed; or trying to cope with loneliness, loss, illness, a difficult marriage or troublesome job; whether you are mourning a lost loved one or facing death itself—even then you have reason to hope. Hope is that to which God has called you. How can you not hope when God declares, **“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you?”** Hebrews 13:5. How can you not hope when God promises, **“He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus?”** Philippians 1:6.

How can you not hope when God insists, **“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,”** Romans 8:1; or later in that same glorious chapter: **“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 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 8:37-39.

Don’t celebrate the Ascension by thinking of Jesus as sitting on a jewel-encrusted throne, distant and uncaring. He isn’t sitting. He’s acting. He isn’t far away. He’s closer than you can imagine. Indeed, He is closer to you now than He would have been during the days of His public ministry. Then, in His state of humiliation, He restricted Himself to one place at one time.

But now, as the exalted and ascended Lord, He is with each of us personally at the same time. He is here in this church building. He is walking amid the pews. He is with you at home, with you at work, with you in the car, with you every minute of every day and every night. The disciples knew this. And it was this knowledge that filled them with such hope and joy. It

was this knowledge that kept them from “just standing there, gaping into heaven.” How did they know? The same way that you and I know. Jesus told them. “Yes, I am ascending into heaven. But at the same time, **“surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”** Now tell me, does that simple promise of the Lord Jesus not fill you with hope?

Second, understand better the inheritance that God has prepared for you. And I do mean prepared for YOU. This inheritance has your name on it. It’s part of that endless, heavenly inheritance—the Father’s eternal estate—included in the promise Jesus made when, referring to His ascension, He said in John 14: **“In My Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.”**

One of the remarkable things about this text is that when Paul prays that we will come to know God better; when he prays that the Holy Spirit will enlighten the eyes of our heart so that we truly know the hope to which God has called us, the inheritance God has prepared for us, and the divine power God exerts daily in our lives, he is praying about blessings we already have. He is praying that God will enable us to better see and better know what God has already given to us and done for us.

The first words of today’s text are: **“For this reason”** in verse 15, referring back to the beautiful realities of Ephesians 1:1-14. **“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”** Paul did not say that God might bless us. He said God has blessed us. He did not say some spiritual gifts. He said every spiritual gift. He **“chose us in Him before the creation of the world,”** verse 4. He **“predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ,”** verse 5. **“In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins,”** verse 7. **“He made known to us the mystery of His will,”** verse 8. **“In Him we were chosen,”** verse 11. **“You also were included in Christ,”** verse 13. **“You were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,”** verse 13.

So, can we honestly “just stand there” and say “God doesn’t love me” or “God has never done a thing for me?” No. Life may be hard at times. Following Jesus can be hard at times, particularly when the following puts us at odds with the world and results in persecution and loss. But the Scripture declares: **“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him, but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit,”** 1 Corinthians 2:9-10. This is the eternal inheritance God has waiting for you.

And finally, understand better the power of God at work in your life and problems. I won’t ask you this morning if you have problems. I know you do. We all do. The real question is, “Are any of your problems bigger than almighty God?” Well, are they? When we face problems, we are so often tempted to think, “God isn’t doing anything;” or, “God isn’t doing enough.” In today’s text the apostle Paul prays that we will see that God is working in

our lives—working and exerting the very same power which **“He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms,”** Ephesians 1:19-20.

What if we approached our lives this way? What if we approached our relationships this way? What if we approached world economics and governments and the coronavirus this way? What if we approached our congregation in Lemmon, South Dakota this way—knowing that in all of these areas, God is in fact exercising the same power with which He raised Jesus from the dead and enthroned Jesus in the heavenly realms? Would we ever have to be afraid again? Would we ever want to “just stand around again?”

Several years ago, I had the privilege of listening to a woman who described a life of hopelessness that you and I, praise God, will prayerfully never know. She was abused as a child. At the age of fifteen, she turned to drugs. The drugs became so demnading that by the age of thirty she had turned to stealing and prostitution to pay for her addiction. By the age of thirty-five, she’d been arrested seven times.

At her last arrest, she faced a total of forty years in prison. The forty years were reduced to three; but it was during those prison years that she heard the Gospel and was turned to Jesus Christ. “At my lowest,” she said, “when I could not take another step; when I looked and smelled like death; when I had no one and nothing to support me except the prayers of my mother; the Lord came to me, changed me, and forgave me when no one else would.” Today, this same woman is preaching Christ in prisons and to hopeless people all over the globe.

I can tell you about the hope to which God has called us, His glorious inheritance that awaits you, and His incomparably great power at work in your life. But that woman was a living example. She closed her personal experience by saying: “Every day I get up and look in the mirror and ask myself, ‘Who are you?’ And I smile and answer, ‘You are a living miracle. Because God, who is rich in mercy, made you alive in Christ.’”

Don’t just stand there. Believe it.