

“THINGS ARE LOOKING UP”

Acts 1:1-11

In 2016, when moving to Fort Myers, Florida, I had a strange dream. I dreamt that I was back on the campus of Immanuel Lutheran College in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, visiting with old classmates. As my classmates and I were talking, a group of young people filed past; smiling, nodding, waving. I realized almost immediately that we were those young people, as we had looked in high school. “Hey,” I said to one old friend, “see that guy over there? That’s me.” In my dream I waved enthusiastically at myself; and the young me—thin, wrinkleless, full head of thick brown hair—waved back, then turned and disappeared into the gray mist of my subconscious.

I didn’t need a psychology degree to interpret my dream. The old me waving goodbye to the young me was symbolic of change and an acute awareness of passing time. In fact, the dream was not really surprising given events in my life: moving from Winter Haven to Fort Myers; resuming a full-time ministry after thirty years; sorting through boxes of possessions, photographs, and nostalgic memories.

Even the process of moving forced the old me to wave a less-than-enthusiastic goodbye to the young me. The young me could have easily carried heavy boxes up and down a flight of stairs. However, the old me struggled at times and regularly rested. More than once my two sons insisted, “No, dad. Don’t lift that. You’ll hurt yourself.” Of course, I lifted the boxes and furniture anyway, unwilling to admit to them or to myself that I was not as young and strong as I used to be. Later, Tylenol helped the aches and pains, but it did nothing for my wounded pride.

All of this, including the brief visit that I had with my oldest son Justin, who had come to Florida to help me move—I began to calculate: “If I see Justin once a year and live to be ninety, how many more visits will that be?”—left me feeling melancholy, low, old, obsolete, and missing the young me. At 4:00 AM on the night of that dream, I was still lying awake, twisting sheets, nursing regrets.

Gradually, however, I remembered that I had a sermon to prepare for the coming Sunday, which happened to be Ascension Sunday. And so my thoughts shifted from high school and Eau Claire, Wisconsin to Bethany, Israel and the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven. I began to wonder: “Isn’t feeling down a stark contrast to the looking up associated with the ascension of Jesus? In fact, isn’t looking up—no, not directionally, but spiritually and confidently—the proper application of the ascension?”

Regrettably, for many Christians and Christian churches the ascension of Jesus Christ has become little more than a historical footnote; a “P.S.” to the work of

redemption, which culminated in the death of Jesus for our sins and the resurrection of Jesus for our justification. But the ascension? Interesting, but not that significant. However, this is not the biblical view of the ascension.

In Scripture the ascension of Jesus has great significance. During the forty days following His resurrection, Jesus, as stated in Acts 1:3, **“gave many convincing proofs that He was alive.”** He met with His disciples, talked with them, ate with them, and allowed them to touch Him—always appearing and disappearing at times and places of His choosing.

Had His ascension been of no importance, Jesus could have simply returned to God the Father unobserved. But the ascension was important for the disciples to witness. This is why we are told in Luke 24:50-51 that **“when He had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, He lifted His hands and blessed them. While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up into heaven.”**

Jesus led His disciples to the site of His ascension. Jesus wanted His disciples to have that final picture of Him ascending into heaven—not with the intent that they should stay on the Mount of Olives or gaze indecisively into the clouds; rather, that by understanding the significance of His ascension, the disciples should move forward with their lives and ministries in great confidence and joy. This is what they did. **“Then they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God,”** Luke 24:52-53.

Therefore, if you and I truly understand the meaning of the ascension, we too will have no reason to look down in gloom, doom, and despair; and every reason to look up in hope and confidence—to say, based on the ascension of Jesus, “Things are looking up.” So, then, what is the meaning of the ascension?

First, the ascension of Jesus signified the completion of His redemptive ministry on earth. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, He atoned for all of our sins. And yes, I know that this is a familiar, simple, even childlike statement. But aren't you glad that it is simple? Aren't you glad that it doesn't change?

From the cross Jesus cried out **“It is finished,”** John 19:30. The Greek word used in this verse, TETELESTAI, was actually a financial term meaning PAID IN FULL. Moreover, the Holy Spirit led the apostle John to write this verb in the perfect tense; a tense signifying a completed action with abiding results. Not “it was finished;” or “it will be finished;” or “it might be finished;” but literally, “it has been finished.” And that our salvation was finished God the Father demonstrated by raising Jesus from the dead. And He demonstrated this again at the ascension when He raised Jesus from the Mount of Olives into heaven itself.

In the Apostles' Creed we confess: "He ascended into heaven." This is true. But the ascension of Jesus was not only something that He did; it was also something done to Him. Look carefully at the words of Acts 1:9, "**After He said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight.**" A similar description is given in Luke 24:51, "**While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up into heaven.**"

What did you notice? According to these verses, Jesus not only ascended into heaven, He was "**taken up**" into heaven. The verbs are actually in the passive voice, meaning that Jesus did not act but was acted upon. He did not return to heaven but was returned to heaven by God the Father, because the work of redemption was entirely done; and of equal importance, because God the Father had entirely accepted this redemptive work.

And this means, dear friends, that there is entirely nothing that we can do and entirely nothing that we need to do in order to be saved other than to trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior. The most important question any of us can ever ask in life is not "How can I become rich?" or "How can I live to be one hundred?" or "How can I write a best-selling novel?" or "How can I influence friends and trounce enemies?" No, the most important question is the question asked in fear and trembling by the jailer at Philippi: "**How can I be saved?**" Paul and Silas answered, "**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved,**" Acts 16:31.

When I look at the young me in my dream and then at the old me in my reality, I see so many sins, so many failings, so many reasons for Jesus Christ to raise His two hands, not in blessing but in disgust, and to say, "That's it. I've had enough. Go away." Looking at your life, would you not admit the same?

Often, it is this overwhelming awareness of our own mortality and sinfulness that leads us to cry out in despair with Paul in Romans 7: "**I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.**" He goes on to lament, "**What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?**" Is there anyone here today who has not made the same lament, who has not asked the same question? But a question that is immediately and gloriously answered, "**Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!**" Romans 7:18-19,24-25.

Salvation is complete. Forgiveness is ours. No matter what else is happening in our lives, how can we not have an abiding, triumphant sense that "things are looking up?"

Second, at His ascension Jesus was enthroned as King of Kings and Lord of Lords; that is, He returned to the full use of His power and glory, which He had hidden during His state of humiliation and servitude with the exception of His miracles and His transfiguration on the mount.

As a child, I often puzzled over the words of the Creed: “He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” Frankly, to my young mind, sitting on the Father’s right hand did not sound very comfortable to me. And why was Jesus sitting down anyway? Was He tired, indifferent, bored, on vacation? Why would God the Son need to sit down?

Of course, Christ “sitting” after His ascension had nothing to do with resting and everything to do with ruling; as in sitting on a throne. Even today we associate sitting or chairs with honor, power, and authority: sitting presidents, congressional seats, county seats, reserved seats, chairmanships, first chairs in orchestras, and department chairs at academic institutions.

And so it is with Christ sitting at the right hand of God. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He not only went to a place; He assumed a position of all-power and all-authority over all things: the world, His Church, and our lives. This was one of the visual lessons of the ascension, and one of the reasons Christ wanted His disciples to witness it. The disciples were to equate Christ’s “going up” with His “presiding over;” with His being the Most High God.

You and I need to see the same lesson in Christ’s ascension. The apostle Paul prayed in Ephesians 1:18-23, **“I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of His mighty strength, which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way.”**

In these verses Paul prayed that through the eyes of our heart, that is, through faith, we might see the almighty power of God at work in the world, in the Church, and in our lives. Why the eyes of our heart? Because we often fail to see Jesus Christ ruling supreme through the eyes in our head. Instead, we see a world filled with wars, terrorism, crime, natural disaster, economic distress, poverty, birth defects, starvation.

We see the visible Christian Church attacked from without and from within. We see problems overwhelming our individual lives: sickness, debt, loss, marital problems. Amid all these things we're tempted to wonder, "Who is in charge here? Anyone?" The answer is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Instead of focusing on the daily headlines or nightly news, we should be focusing on Paul's prayer for the Ephesians—that through faith they, and we, might see that Christ is infinitely above **"all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given."**

We should be focusing on the words of Paul to the Philippians and his description of the absolute sovereignty of Christ: **"Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name"**—EVERY name, including the names ISIS, Obama, Trump, Putin, Kim Jong-Un, Illness, Catastrophe, Economic Distress, and even Gospel Ministry. **"The name that is above every name,"** wrote Paul, **"that at the name of JESUS every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father,"** Philippians 2:9-11.

"He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." Oh, what a difference it must make when we understand this aspect of the ascension. "I may be sick, but Jesus Christ is in control. I may be struggling with finances, but Jesus Christ is in control. I may be worried about the state of this nation or the faith of my children, but Jesus Christ is in control. We may be a relatively small Christian congregation faced with a challenging ministry, but Jesus Christ is in control."

This is precisely why Jesus told His little congregation before ascending into heaven: **"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. THEREFORE go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I will be with you always, to the very end of the age,"** Matthew 28:18-20. How can we hear this and not say about our world, our lives, our ministry, our marriages, and problems: "Things are looking up"?

Third and finally, as our ascended Lord, Jesus lives eternally to intercede on our behalf. This is a beautiful, comforting, and repeated truth in Scripture. And I think it essential to heart this truth in God's own words. Paul wrote in Romans 8:33-34, **"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? 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."**

John wrote in his First Epistle: **“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have One who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world,”** 1 John 2:1-2.

The author of Hebrews wrote: **“Because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood. Therefore, He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them,”** Hebrews 7:23-15. I’m reminded of the beautiful Easter hymn: “He lives to bless me with His love. He lives to plead for me above. He lives my hungry soul to feed. He lives to help in time of need.” LH 200:3. And it isn’t just that He lives to help. He knows exactly how to help.

In spite of everything I have told you this morning about the ascension of Jesus—how it signified the completion of His earthly ministry; how the ascended Lord is ruling over all things and always interceding on our behalf—is there anything more comforting than the knowledge that He who governs all things, He who intercedes for us in all things, personally experienced all aspects of our humanity, yet remained without sin? With this knowledge you and I can never say, “God doesn’t understand what I am going through.” He does understand; for He Himself went through it in Person of Jesus Christ.

According to Luke 24:50, **“When He had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, He lifted His hands and blessed them. While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up into heaven.”** The last picture the disciples had of Jesus was His two hands raised in blessing; hands which still bore and will always bear the marks of His love, grace, commitment, and mercy: the marks of the crucifixion.

Consider those two crucified hands of the ascended Lord, the two hands governing the world; the two hands controlling every aspect of your life; the two hands reaching out to embrace you; and you will understand why “things are looking up” in Jesus Christ.