

# *Blessing and Going*

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Luke 24:44-53

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Of all the scenes from Jesus' life, all those "chapters" in Christ's story, I think the one we least understand is the Ascension.

Really, I think most of us just don't know what to do with it.

We don't get it.

We can't grasp it.

We, many of us anyway, don't think about it at all.

When it comes to Ascension Day, most of us are at a bit of a loss.

It's like we've got A.D.D.: "Ascension Deficit Disorder."

(You can thank me later.)

Yes, Ascension Day, which is the fortieth day of Easter. It's always on a Thursday. This year it was easy to count, because Easter Sunday was on the first of April, there are 30 days in April, then 10 more days. May 10, 2018.

It's on that day, the Thursday some five and a half weeks after Easter Sunday, when we celebrate the glorification of Jesus Christ, when we mark the event of Christ's being taken up into heaven. It's because of the Ascension that we profess in the Apostles' Creed, "he ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty."

Some of you have heard this story.

My friend Okke Postma (whom some of you know, as well) grew up in the Netherlands. Even though he's lived in this country for over forty years, and his wife is from Webster, he still sounds like he grew up in the Netherlands.

Some years ago, Okke told me that in the Netherlands they have a tradition on Ascension Day, which is a national holiday there. On that day, it's common (or at least it was when Okke was a kid) for Dutch Christians to get up early and start riding their bicycles. (And, as some of us know, the Dutch have a lot of bicycles.)

On those bicycles, they try to get as much distance as they can from their home churches. When it gets to near ten o'clock, they stop pedaling and listen for the ringing of a church bell. And to the nearest church from which they hear the ringing bell these peddling Dutchmen will make their way, to attend worship, on the Day of Ascension. The pastors in those churches will preach in their own pulpits to a congregation not their own. And the faithful will actively celebrate the truth that, by the Spirit of the Ascended Jesus, the body of Christ is on the move, not bound to one place.

Pretty neat.

What are we to make of the Ascension?



It's Luke who recounts Christ's ascension into heaven. And he does this twice. He does it here at the end of his gospel, and he does it as well at the beginning of the book of Acts. In those two places, he highlights and emphasizes different things.

Today, I want to focus on how he describes the Ascension in his gospel, and pay attention to those different things he highlights there.

This is how it develops:

Jesus tells his closest followers that all he's been through has been foretold. He opens their minds to the meaning of scripture. He tells them that they will testify to his good news throughout the whole world. He promises that he will soon send the Holy Spirit. He shows himself to them as he truly is: the Son of God, the Lamb that was slain yet now raised from the dead. And then, leading them out of the city, he blesses them, and then he goes.

And here I am just undone.

Because it's that very sentence, verse 51, that's been sticking with me:

"While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven."

*While* he was blessing them, he *withdrew* from them.

In the very midst of his blessing, he is found to be no longer in their midst.

"Mid-bless," so to speak, he goes away.

I can't help but feel that this really is the heart of it all. I sense there is something profoundly right that his blessing is in his withdrawing. This, I feel, is the point: his blessing in his going.

But I also think that it is right here in this place, with these words, the blessing in the going, that we are profoundly challenged and even disturbed.



Yes, challenged, and disturbed. For Jesus to bless by going away, that just doesn't make sense, it doesn't feel right ... to many.

Because we speak of Jesus — don't we? — as being near, here, present and in our midst.

We understand faith — don't we? — as the lively awareness of Christ's presence.

And we understand absence — don't we? — as a cause for sorrow and as a sign of loss.

I also recall the good number of psalms, as well as mystics and poets and theologians, all expressing the difficult experience of many: the absence of God.

I have experienced the desert of God's absence.

I have known the wilderness of God's distance.

I have walked the nowhere's land of God's silence.

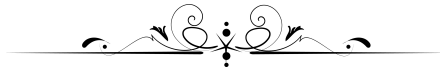
I'm sure most of you have, too.

To be sure, such experiences of God's absence may speak more about where *we* are rather than where *God* is. Absolutely, it's sometimes not God who is far away, but rather it is we who have left.

Yet these experiences may also, or instead, express something important and true about God:

who cannot be controlled,  
who is not our cosmic butler.

I think this is partly what's going on with the Ascension.



Why is Jesus not with us, as he was? For surely, he is not.

Jesus is not right here, for me to hear, and see, and embrace.

He is not here, for me to notice him nod in understanding when I pour out my soul to him.

He is not here, for me to receive with my ears his audible word of comfort when I give voice to my pain.

Whatever his presence means, it is not the same as what his presence meant before he ascended to heaven, his blessing in his going.

Instead, he is in heaven.

But what does *that* mean?

What does *that mean*?

It means that he reigns over the whole cosmos.

It means that his power is the very power of God.

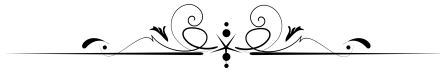
It means that he transcends the bounds of creation.

It means that he is not an artifact of history.

It means that he is not limited by time or space.

It means that he is not stuck in the past,

where we can domesticate him,  
sentimentalize him,  
make him our pet or plaything.



Of course, a lot of people do try.

They try to turn him into a good luck charm.

They try to fit him into their feelings.

They try to enlist him into their causes.

They try to conscript him into their wars.

And they fail.

Sure, they don't think they've failed.

They think they express a holy faith in him when they use him to justify their hatreds.

They think they are faithful to him when they make faith in him solely about their own feelings.

They think they have him right when they spiritualize his good news so that it is emptied of all social and economic implications.

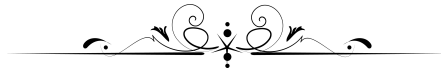
They think they are good Christians holding orthodox Christian beliefs when they make Christ's gospel solely about the afterlife and not at all about this life.

They think they understand him when they appropriate his grace for themselves but are strictly "rules are rules" with others.

They think they get him when they believe allegiance to country is the exact same thing as faithfulness to him.

They think all that, but he remains

the sovereign Lord of Love,  
the blessed Prince of Peace,  
the everlasting Son of the Father.



Jesus is not only risen from the dead. He is also ascended to heaven. “While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.” His blessing is in his going.

It is a blessing of his that he is not stuck in the past, where we can keep him remote from us.

It is a blessing of his that he is not bound to the limits of space and time, where we can avoid his blessing and his judgment on here and now.

It is a blessing of his that he is not confined to the first century, where we can ignore him, thinking that he has nothing to say to any new thing that comes along,

each new idea,  
every new technology,  
all the opportunities and challenges that people today face.

His blessing is in his withdrawing. His blessing is in his going. His power is greater as he wields it on high.

As a great floodlight shines over a larger territory when it is raised up to a great height, as a strong singer’s voice projects farther when it is on a high stage, so the power of Jesus in perfect union with his love and mercy is more effective now because he has ascended.

Hear me: Jesus is not less a part of your life because he is seated at the Father’s right hand. He is more so.

His ascension does not make him less able to guide you, comfort you, bless you. It makes him more so.

Because he is ascended, his love for us, so great that they he died for that love, is given eternal significance.

Because he is ascended, his unending relationship with us is one of blessing.

His blessing is in his going. We are blessed by Jesus who is on the move.



It’s a striking thing, what Luke includes at the end of his gospel, right after Jesus had ascended, after he blessed his dearest followers and withdrew from them.

“[T]hey worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

His ascension led them to see him as truly the Son of God, co-equal in majesty and equally worthy of worship. And then, *with joy*, they went to the temple and remained there to worship and praise God.

Christ's ascension didn't make them sad.

It didn't cause them to give up.

It wasn't a regrettable thing, a terrible thing, a thing to be mourned.

No, they were joyful after Jesus ascended. It led them to praise. It led them to worship. It led them to wait in expectation for the Holy Spirit, who would lead them to be Christ's witnesses throughout the world.

And so it can be for us.

In Christ's blessing and going, we, too, are made his witnesses.

We, too, are promised the Holy Spirit.

We, too, are engaged to share the good news of repentance and forgiveness in his name.

We, too, are made ready for the joyful work of Christ's people, for blessing and for going.