

A Sermon for DaySpring
By Eric Howell
The Presence of the Ascended Christ
Ephesians 1
May 12, 2024

Happy Mother's Day to all who have much to celebrate, which is just about everyone with a belly button. And Happy Mother's Day to those who deserve to be celebrated. It's good for our spirits to have days of remembrance, celebration, and thanksgiving. And what better occasion is there than for those who have blessed us with life and for those who nurtured us in all kinds of ways. However our entrenched language for God may suggest otherwise, mothering is also the face of God, the Creator, the Redeemer, the Sustainer. Thanks be to God.

Likewise, today, happy Ascension Sunday to all who gather on this, the last Sunday in the Easter Season. We come to the end of the Easter season today. Easter began in the half-light of uncertainty at the dawn of a Sunday in the cemetery outside Jerusalem in the whispers, "He is not here..." It comes to its end in the glory of the mystery of Christ's ascension to the right hand of the Father. He is not here, again.

At the end of the season of Lent, Jesus is lifted high on a cross in crucifixion.
At the end of the season of Easter, Jesus is lifted high in glory in ascension.

The same Jesus crucified in shame, raised from the grave, now raised in glory. Our same eyes lifted in sorrow to the cross, are now lifted to the skies in... what? Celebration? But is it really and fully? Perhaps, but again, he is not here. So are they lifted in sorrow? Not exactly. Then what?

Ron Rolheiser observes, "Among the deeper mysteries in life perhaps the one we struggle with the most is the mystery of the Ascension. It's not so much that we misunderstand it, we simply don't understand it... The Ascension names and highlights a paradox that lies deep at the center of life, namely, that we all reach a point in life where we can only give our presence more deeply by going away so that others can receive the full blessing of our spirits."¹

Jesus was raised from the tomb, not to die again, but to live forever and ever. But not to walk amongst us forever and ever, not in the same way. But he was raised to live and to reign--the ascension affirms this. Christ is alive, Christ is glorified, Christ is forever and ever. Today finishes what the crucifixion tried to destroy and what Easter morning started--the glory and power of Christ forever. Christ died. Christ was raised. Christ will come again.

¹ <https://ronrolheiser.com/painful-goodbyes-and-the-ascension/>

Rolheiser again: “The ascension deepens intimacy by giving us precisely a new presence, a deeper, richer one, but one which can only come about if our former way of being present is taken away.”

One congregation that exhibits this new intimacy is the church in Ephesus. In the letter to the Ephesians, one of the warmest and most encouraging in the Bible, St. Paul offers a blessing to this church, rooted in this affirmation of Christ’s glory. Here is a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving and encouragement for friends who mean so much. He says, “I know your faith in Jesus /Christ and your love toward all the saints. I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.”

These are people, like us, living after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. May we, like them, be people known for our faith, our love for one another, and our gratitude for all of God’s blessings.

In Ephesians, we see a remarkable affirmation of the ascendant Christ’s rule and reign. Christ is far above earthly place, far above earthly power, and far above earthly time. When we say Christ is exalted, he is magnified, he is glorified, we mean it. And we mean more than we even know we mean, we who are bound by place, power, and time.

He is far above place. He is seated in the heavenly places at the right hand of God. The right hand is the position of honor. The right hand of God is the highest position of honor and veneration imaginable. Christ, raised from the indignity of his suffering and death, is now raised to the highest place of glory. The church’s historic icons represent this, depicting Christ seated high above the scene below. You may remember that in his ministry, Jesus rarely traveled outside of Galilee and Judea and then only barely outside. But now, we affirm, Christ is above all. For a past generation perhaps this was easier to imagine, Jesus enthroned above the earth. In modern times, as our understanding of the vastness of the universe increases, our theological imaginations get stretched. Let them stretch. Let them stretch and stretch. Don’t worry, they won’t break. They’ll grow. Christ is far above place.

And He is far above power. He is far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, four synonyms for everything that we see that is for us or against us, allies and enemies, Christ is above all and is the head of all. He cannot be reduced or diminished to a nationalistic mascot. He is not to be underestimated like this. Christ, raised from the brutality of one earthly empire’s power, is now seated at the highest place of power. And this extends beyond earthly empires. There is this sense that rule, authority, power, and dominion include forces we cannot see with our eyes but are just as real. He is over them as well. All things are at his feet.

And He is far above time. He is above every name that is named, not only in this age but in the age to come. Christ is not just back then in history. Christ is not a future promise for another day. Christ is here, with us, amongst us. He is the I Am of the eternal now, the one who was and is and is to come. And goes before us, as he says, to prepare a place for you.

Christ is far above earthly place, far above earthly power, far above the limits of time.

Yet, he is not just far above as in removed from. It can seem that way, that Christ is so far removed from all that we know, what good is he to us now? Christ is so far removed from what we experience in daily life of grief or fear or suffering or trouble, or shame, what good is he to me? People can sometimes get the idea that their spiritual life is supposed to be like that and so they become religious parodies of themselves. You ever heard of someone so heavenly minded they are of little earthly good? Even the desert fathers were not impressed with people like that. One of them (Abba Hyperichius) taught, “The person who teaches others by action, not by words is the one who is truly wise.”

Irenaeus wrote, “Spirits without bodies will never be spiritual men and women. It is our entire being, that is to say, the soul and flesh combined, which by receiving the Spirit of God constitutes the spiritual [person].” Faith in this life is embodied. It is hands and feet and washing dishes and helping your neighbor when they’re in need; it’s doing the right thing when it’s the hard thing; it’s saying you’re sorry when you’ve done someone wrong. It’s, as Kathleen Norris put it, “the quotidian mysteries: laundry, liturgy and ‘women’s work’”--which is definitely not just women’s work.

And yet, for all of this, we don’t lose the mystery of our faith. Let us not lose the mystery of our faith. The church isn’t just a sociological category or a laundry list of must-dos. It’s not just a frail, human institution; it’s not just a business or a non-profit, or a social service organization or political party; it’s not just a society of like-minded people who seek warm-hearted interactions. There’s power here beyond all of that, a power the ascension anoints, lest we forget. This power, Ephesians says, is that the church is the body, the fullness of Christ, who himself fills all in all, here in place, in power, and in time.

I’ve seen that power at work in these last days. My parents really haven’t been involved in a church for years. Bad health and roads that fork in life just resulted in a situation where they’re years from actually having a pastor of their own, or a small group or Sunday school class or any of those things that tie us together with others.

And then Mom died last week. It felt lonely there. I called on an old seminary friend pastor in Ft. Worth to come pray over her in the hospital. She did, even though she didn’t know mom, and I was gladdened by that.

Then, in the days that followed, they showed up. Those people. A few of them had been there all along, but now they showed up, those old friends from Sunday schools and wedding showers and softball teams parent guilds, and chaperoned trips, and committees. Some churches have committees, did you know? That church even had a committee on committees. That’s commitment to committee life. Those people, they came. You know they came with pound cakes and boxes of sandwiches. They wrote dad and called and called and called him until he took the phone off the hook. The shared life in the church, over many years, in turns out, wasn’t just transactional or dutiful from a human

perspective; It wasn't just individualized spiritual experience for people who happened to be in the same room for an hour a week; it was relational. And it went deep, and it stuck.

And the church showed up.

There's an old Latin phrase about the church that comes into English as The Church Militant. I've never particularly liked that term or one of its anthems *Onward Christian Soldiers*. I don't like that imagery for the church.

But what I do like is what's way behind the term—the church on earth, a pilgrim church, serving, working, showing up, struggling together, with and for one another on good and hard days. The Church pilgrim; the church serving; the body of Christ “churching.” Until the day comes when we each join The Church Triumphant—I do like that term—we are the church churching here. And we all have a part. It's the Church Showing Up. And it's beautiful—in seasons of grief and children's classrooms and maybe even in committees, maybe. When you're in the body, “Christ far above” doesn't seem so distant and far removed. It's Christ here in this very room.

The church showing up is the body of Christ in place, in power, and in time.

In Colossians, he is the firstborn of all Creation, the one through whom all things were created in heaven and on earth. We are reconciled from our alienation and hostilities to be holy. This is a mystery.

In Romans, he is for us. We are more than conquerors through him from whom nothing can separate us, not death nor life nor anything in all creation. This is consolation.

In Revelation, he is the Alpha and the Omega, the one who was and is and is to come. We cast our crowns at his feet. This is worship.

In John, he was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. We walk into his light from the darkness. This is our hope.

For all of this, and I mean all of this, he is Emmanuel, with us even now. Christ is the head. The church is his body. The church is the fullness of him who fills all in all.

That phrase. It's a wow passage: the church is the fullness of him who fills all place, fills all power, fills all time. Only by grasping some small part of that can we even begin to fulfill his charge: be my witnesses to the ends of the earth: to all places, to all powers, at all times.

Tomorrow at the funeral, we will hear sung an old song I used to sing in my youth choir, sung by a duet of one of those youth parents who poured her life into us and one of those youth from those old days. The song is called *This Very Room*, and Kathy will play it there. It's so simple. One of the lines says, “In this very room, there's quite enough love for one

like me. And there's quite enough hope, and quite enough power to chase away any gloom. For Jesus, Lord Jesus is in this very room."

He is far above all; he is amongst us now. He is with us in those around you. He is with us in this bread and in this cup, this peace and presence of Christ to you.

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