

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 7, 2013

Second Sunday of Easter

Ephesians 1:15-23
Easter 2/Creed 9

...he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the God the Father almighty...

Normally, the Bible reading for today begins a number of Sundays when we hear the stories of Jesus appearing to the disciples in his resurrection body. And as we move through them we are reminded that in the Church, Easter is a season, not just a day. So we'll leave the resurrection balloon up until Pentecost at the end of May when the season ends; and you will hear more about the resurrection from the kids who'll be speaking later.

But since we're working through the Apostles' Creed this year, we have to move on pretty quickly to keep up and so today we get, "...ascended into Heaven and sitting on the right hand of God the Father."

But before we leave the resurrection, I have to share a joke I received on Easter Monday...

God and the devil were playing poker. At stake was the very soul of God's beloved son, Jesus Christ. As the devil picked up his cards, a wicked smile spread across his face. In his hand was a royal flush, the highest possible poker combination. "He's mine!" cried the devil as he laid down his cards. "I win!"

"Not so fast," replied the Almighty. And then God proceeded to lay down his cards, one by one. Five aces, each in a different suit.

"But that's impossible!" the devil screamed.
"Apparently not!"

The impossible seems to describe much of what we've been discovering in the Creed. From Creation to Jesus' conception and birth. From his violent death on a cross and the journey of the "three days" – from the cross to the tomb, from the tomb to the dead/hell, from hell back to earth. And then from the earth back to heaven – what the church formally refers to as The Ascension.

And again, the Christian response to "the impossible" is not to ask HOW, but to ask WHY and WHAT DOES THIS MEAN. Because the Christian faith and being a Christian is defined as much by the QUESTIONS we ask as by the answers we offer.

So, what does it mean that Jesus ascended into heaven and sits at God's right hand? Does it mean that Jesus just went away, that he's taking a break, like he's on vacation for a few thousand years until he comes back? Does it mean that Jesus has been taken away from us?

Is that it? Jesus is absent, retired up there in heaven, and now we're on our own. Jesus, missing in action. Out of sight, out of mind?

That may be what it looks like on the surface. But we need to remember that Jesus had told his disciples that he would be going away, returning to his Father, that the Father would glorify him upon the completion of his mission.

Jesus appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days, met with them, taught them, invited them touch his hands and his side that bore the marks of his crucifixion. The Ascension is part of that continuing lifting up of Christ, his glorification, and further proof of his victorious, bodily resurrection.

It shows the Father's approval of what his Son has done in dying for the sins of the world. God is saying yes to that. It shows the victory of the cross. Ascension Day is Christ's triumph day. He is received into heaven with a "Job well done!" and "Welcome home!"

But there's more. Christ ascends into heaven and "sits at the right hand of the Father." In the biblical way of thinking and talking, to be seated at the right hand of a great king means to exercise royal authority. And the expression has carried this meaning through time and cultures to today – we still speak of a person of importance being a "right hand man."

Why? Because for most of us, our right hand is our dominant hand, the hand with which we do stuff. So to be at God's right hand means that Jesus is the one who "does things," makes things happen – which is to exercise divine, heavenly power and authority. That's what he is doing now, seated at the right hand of the Father. (We'll hear more about that next Sunday.)

Which is pretty amazing actually! Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ now is ruling all things in heaven and on earth. He is Lord of all! That is what Ephesians is saying, as Paul explains what being seated at the right hand means: God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

So Jesus Christ now is ruling all things through and for the sake of his church. We – the church – are intimately connected to Christ. He is the head, we are his body - and he is head over everything. All rule, all authority, all power and dominion, belong to the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ.

What's more, when Jesus ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God, he went there as both our brother and our high priest. Christ is both true God and true man, and now ascended to the throne room of God, we have a friend in high places. Jesus knows our every weakness, and is at the same time our advocate before God.

And this has implications for how we pray. That Jesus is at the right hand of God means something about how we pray. In the Old Testament, the time before Jesus, the Israelites believed that their prayers had to go through the priests who offered sacrifices on behalf of the people. But Jesus – his death – was the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. Jesus ascended into heaven as our great high priest. Like the high priest went into the Holy of Holies with the blood of the atonement from the sacrifice of the animals, so Christ enters heaven and presents his blood as the perfect sacrifice on our behalf.

Which means that through Jesus, we have full access to God – unmediated through anyone else. It also says in the Bible that Jesus is praying for us at the right hand of God. That's why we/I always pray "in the name of Jesus / in Jesus' name." Because of this right hand of God stuff. He has the Father's ear, and he is able to help in every time of need.

Our ascended Lord is seated at the right hand of God, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. But does “far above” mean “far away”? Does Jesus’ absence from our sight mean that he is now distant and detached? Triumphant, yes, transcendent, yes, but rather cold and aloof, far removed from us, far away up in heaven. Is that the meaning of Ascension?

Well, the deeper we go into the Christian faith, the more paradoxes we encounter – and here is another one. Because it is NOT a contradiction to say that Jesus is both “far above” and “here and near.” Jesus is both!

This is proclaimed at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. The risen Lord Jesus meets with his disciples during those forty days, and he says: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (The Great Commission, Matthew 28)

This little benediction is a fitting answer to the question “what does the Ascension mean, and mean for us?” Jesus declares that ALL authority has been given to him – that is Christ sitting at the right hand of the Father. There’s the “far above.” And then, “behold, I am with you always.” “With you”! There is the “here and near”!

So what does this look like? How about this: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (IN MY NAME – not just gathered, but gathered in his name) Certainly when we gather for worship on Sundays, Christ is here, present among us, to bless, to forgive, to feed.

Which leads us to one more thought about what this means and looks like. Think of Jesus’ words, “This is my body, this is my blood.” Those words are still true, even as we celebrate our Lord’s ascension into heaven. That Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father does not mean that he is limited to one small space off in a distant galaxy somewhere.

Christ is here, and, in particular, he gives us his body and his blood at this table, for us to eat and to drink, and so to receive him as fully as possible. Christ’s body and blood are here, really present in this sacrament, for your forgiveness, life, and salvation.

The exalted Savior has ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of his Father. And thank God he is! It shows he has won the victory over death for us and will come again one day to bring us to himself. We share in his resurrection and eternal life.

Jesus right now is at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us; he is both our brother and our sympathetic high priest at the same time. Jesus is ruling all things in heaven and on earth for the sake of his beloved church. That’s all good news. Jesus is “far above” all other rule and power, exercising divine, heavenly authority, for our good.

And not only is Jesus “far above,” he is also “here and near.” He is here among us, present with his church, present to bless you, God’s children. Our Savior is here, with us in our trials and difficulties, walking with us all the way. He could not be any closer.

That’s what we’re saying when we declare that “he ascended and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” He is both “far above” and “here and near.” Seated at the right hand of the Father, and here among us - his people.

Let's rise and say together what the church has believed for nearly 2,000 yrs.

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again from the dead;
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.
I believe in the Holy Spirit;
the holy catholic Church;
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body; and life everlasting. Amen.

And that, my friends is what Christians get to believe! Amen.