

Sermon Draft

Text: Ephesians 1:15–23

Sermon: Ascension 2022

The Ascension is one of the great, overlooked festivals of the church year. Easter and Pentecost fall on Sundays and so are always observed. Christmas has such deep cultural and traditional roots that, even when falling in the middle of the week, it is still observed by most Christians. But Ascension, always falling on a Thursday in the middle of the week in spring, is usually missed.

The Canadian company BioWare had a hit in 2010 with their video game *Mass Effect 2*. The antagonists in the game are a race of aliens who are collecting all life in the galaxy, stripping it of intelligence, and making it serve them. Landing at one colony, the leader of this group speaks to his subordinates and says, “Prepare these humans for ascension.” It was very clear that he did not mean “get these humans ready to go up, up, and away.” He meant prepare to change them from being human into some other form.

Jesus' ascension, in the same way, is not about him going up a divine elevator to some higher floor in the building. It means, as Paul writes, that he has now been enthroned over all creation (Eph 1:20–22). Just as a king or queen “ascends” the throne, so, too, does our Lord now ascend. Just as Christ has ascended, so, too, will we on the great Last Day when we are raised from death and seated with Jesus in the heavenly places.

There are some churches that have the tradition of celebrating Ascension on the Seventh Sunday of Easter. The introduction of Passion Sunday was an attempt to ensure that the events of Good Friday would not be missed by those out of the habit of attending worship other than on Sundays. The transference of Ascension to a close Sunday would serve the same purpose. Not ideal, but then, the Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath. Ensuring that the event of the ascension is not missing from the average Christian's worship life may be more important than keeping the correct date with few present to have this particular word of hope placed into their minds and hearts.

No good preacher would ever start a sermon with a four-letter word, much less base the whole sermon around it. But I'm going to anyway. That word is h-o-p-e: hope. You might be thinking that doesn't count. Sure, hope has four letters, but it's not that kind of four-letter word. I beg to differ. I think we live in a world where talking about hope is a little like burping at the dinner table. Everything is so bad, how can there be real hope? With the rise of depression all around us, drug overdoses, mistrust, and hatred, can we still have lives based in hope?

We need hope. Hope is not the same as optimism. It is tied to action, not attitude. The late British Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book *Celebrating Life*, pointed out that optimism is passive while hope is active. Optimism is having a gym membership. Hope is going jogging every morning.

Despair is the opposite of hope. It leads to inaction, guilt, and fear. As Luther writes in the Small Catechism, when we pray *“lead us not into temptation” we are asking that the Lord would “guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice”* (Lord's Prayer, Sixth Petition),

With hope, we are able to move through the day, the year, through life.

Without hope, everything begins to grind to a halt. Where can we find true hope? False hope is no hope at all. False hope causes us to live life trusting in a lie. Many cults have fixed an end date for the world, and people have built their lives around hope in something that turned out to be a lie.

False hope has a great cost. It can lead to bitterness, disillusion, bad living, rebellion against God. In short, false hope leads to despair and unholiness. As Jesus proclaimed, ***“A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit”*** (Matthew 7:18).

Paul ties real hope to Jesus, and specifically to his ascension. Because God has raised Jesus ***“from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places”*** (v 20), we have a real hope for our own future. Real hope is found in Christ’s ascension.

Jesus is not gone; he has been promoted and is taking us with him. When senior staff persons or politicians take new, higher positions, they often take their trusted staff with them. Such is the case with us. Christ is the Head, and we are members of the Body, the Church. If all things are under his feet, it means they are under ours as well (vs 22–23).

We are trusted not because we are innately trustworthy, but because Jesus has called us. He has given us “*the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints*” (v 18). It is Jesus who has called us to sainthood by the will of the Father, and it is by the Spirit that we are given this wisdom and knowledge. This is the Good News: by Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension our sins are forgiven, and we inherit a portion of his riches by grace.

We do not walk, talk, and eat with Jesus as the early disciples did. But if Jesus had not ascended, imagine the fighting among Christians for a seat next to him! Because he is ascended, he is with us all, and we can live lives of hope of being in his presence forever. We have hope.

Our world is awash in hopelessness. We hear a message of hopelessness every day. “The climate is changing, our cities will be flooded, and our coasts destroyed by waves of hurricanes.” “Viruses will take away our freedoms and lives.” “Faith in institutions is collapsing and people are turning ever increasingly to violence to solve their problems.” The market for hope is wide open.

Many are in the business of selling false hopes. We hear false hopes proclaimed every day as well: “This pill will help you live longer.” “This stock will make you rich.” “This party or person will save the country.” “This prayer will make everything all right.” Wolves in sheep’s clothing are all around us.

Jesus’ ascension gives us real hope. You know there is a God and that he cared enough for you to send his Son to redeem you. You know that Son was crucified, died, and has ascended to rule over all things and be with us always as he promised. Ascension doesn’t mean “gone.” It means present in all the places he said he’d be: in his Word, in his Sacraments, among his people. That is our hope.

There are many great festivals in the church year. We all love Christmas, celebrating the baby Jesus, the manger, the angels and shepherds. Easter has its lilies and empty tomb and bewildered disciples. Pentecost pushes us out into the world to be the Body of Christ. Ascension is unique, in that its central message is hope. It centers our faith, strengthens us for what lies ahead, and gives us the promise of a better future. Christ ascended to ensure us of our eternal place with Him.

As the great hymn says, God *“has raised our human nature On the clouds to God’s right hand; There we sit in heav’nly places, There with Him in glory stand. Jesus reigns, adored by angels; Man with God is on the throne. By our mighty Lord’s ascension We by faith behold our own”* (LSB 494:5).

That is our hope. Amen