

Sermon – May 16, 2021
“Ascension”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:6-11

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. May they be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Come, Lord Jesus, and astonish us with your word. Amen

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! This is the last Sunday in the season of Easter. Next week we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This past Thursday marked the 40th day since the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Over the last few Sundays, we have looked at some of the many appearances of the resurrected Jesus to his disciples. We should notice a common theme in these appearances; none occur at the same time. Jesus is not in two places at the same time during these 40 days. Whether he appears to an individual or a group, Jesus is limited in his resurrected body to being in one place at a time. On this day, the 40th day, Jesus leads his followers out of Jerusalem as far as Bethany (and we should notice that the resurrected Jesus leaves Jerusalem, which is God’s presence leaving the Holy City) and after he blesses those who followed him, he separates from them and is carried up into heaven. God in the flesh, the resurrected Jesus, the first to be reborn from the dead, returns to heaven.

A few minutes ago, we stood and read together the Apostle’s Creed. This is a historic creed that has been given to the Church and is a very concise statement of our beliefs about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The early church had a much shorter creed. Their first creed was “Jesus is Lord!” Have we ever noticed as we say the Apostle’s Creed that all of the verbs up to Jesus’ ascension into heaven are past tense? We find verbs up to that point such as, “Jesus was crucified dead and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven” these past tense verbs are used to represent events that have happened in the past. Notice, though, once Jesus gets to heaven, he sitteth, or is sitting, at the right hand of God the Father. The verb tense changes to present tense, an active, on-going event. Jesus is currently sitting at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. He ascended there on Ascension Day and is still sitting at the Father’s right hand. Jesus’ resurrected body ascends into heaven and is currently residing there. This is

not Jesus in a spiritual form; this is a real, resurrected body in heaven. A question we will investigate this morning is “What does this mean for us?” or “What does it mean for us that Jesus is currently sitting at the right hand of God?” Notice also that the last part of the Creed is in the future tense. Jesus will come again to judge the quick and the dead. This is often how we actually think about Jesus. He will come back some day in the future at the end of time, and we need to try to obey him as we live out our days on earth as best we can, hoping that we are good enough that sometime in the future when Jesus returns, we will be judged on our performance and may get into heaven. There is a great deal wrong with that type of thought, and as we look at this idea of Jesus in heaven, let’s see if we can correct that thinking. Let’s start with realizing that according to the Apostle’s Creed and scripture, Jesus is sitting at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. This morning, let’s spend a few minutes seeking to understand some of what it might mean for us that Jesus is sitting at the right hand of God.

Let’s start with the right hand of God. This is the place of authority. The one who sits in this place exercises the authority of God. Does anyone have an idea about what is the most quoted Old Testament scripture by the New Testament writers? What Old Testament scripture did the writers of the New Testament most often include in their witness to Jesus? If you guessed Psalm 110:1, you are correct. It is referenced some twenty times in the New Testament. Psalm 110:1 says, “The LORD says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Psalm 110 was used when kings of Israel were crowned or inaugurated king of Israel. The New Testament writers use this verse from Psalm 110 to help us understand that Jesus is seated at God’s right hand, the place of authority, and as such has the same authority as God. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the King of kings. Jesus is Lord with all authority reigning in heaven. Jesus is Lord of all of the universe. Everything is under Jesus’ authority. Jesus has all the power of God the Father and exercises it over all things in heaven and earth. Let me say that again, it is important: and earth. Jesus has authority over all of creation. Now our experience here on earth brings this statement into question. In the last year we have experienced a pandemic. Just a few days ago a tornado tore through our county. There is growing strife and deadly conflict in the world. In the last few days, we have found ourselves in the midst of a fuel shortage. People we know have died, friends and loved ones are ill. If we turn on the news, we see clearly that evil is at work on the earth. Our experience certainly seems to call to question this statement that Jesus now has authority in heaven over all things. And we may ask ourselves,

as so many nonbelievers do, “If Jesus, who is loving and kind, has this authority over heaven and the earth, why do so many evil things happen? Why does a loving Jesus allow bad things to happen to people? Does Jesus really have authority on earth?” We understand from our experiences and what we see on our news feeds too well that not all governments, not all people, are cooperating with or submitting to Jesus’ authority. They do not all yet recognize that Jesus has authority over them. They are not yet footstools under Jesus’ feet, as Jesus has not yet come in power. In the end, as so many of the New Testament writers have stated, all of Jesus’ enemies will be his footstool, and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. Remember that early creed? It seems to us too often that we are many days from the point where every knee will bow on earth to Jesus Christ and honor his authority. Jesus is a humble, patient king and is not in a hurry to exercise his authority in power over the earth even though he is reigning now in heaven. Most people on the earth are unaware of Jesus and his authority and rule on the earth. Others are very aware and stubbornly refuse to acknowledge or submit to his authority. Too many Christians across the earth are painfully aware of authorities on earth who do not obey Jesus as they experience persecution. Yet, Jesus is reigning and is not in a hurry to exercise his power, but waits so that all may come to repentance. Jesus, as a humble king, also reigns without violating or overriding human free will, which he has ordained in humanity. Those who do not submit to Jesus’ reign are those of humanity who are seeking to rule in the place of Jesus in their own feeble power, attempting to put themselves in Jesus’ place and overrule his authority. As a result, we all experience heartache and injustice, suffering and pain, oppositions and persecutions as we live in the world. This is the sin of Adam, and our human nature, to put one’s self in the place of God. Let us realize that Jesus is sitting at God’s right hand and is reigning and will come in power, and when he does, every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. We should all look forward to that time as it will be a time when all authorities, all governments, will rest on Jesus’ shoulders, and when governments bow to Jesus they will flourish. When they rest on their own authority, they falter, causing hardship and strife for those they have been given authority over. It is a great paradox that so many people see Jesus as an unloving authority because he allows governments to choose if they will rest on his shoulders or their own. And when they choose not to rest in Jesus and their weak authority results in terrible consequences for those they have authority over, the people do not blame their leaders for the consequences of government actions that are their own choices and will. Instead,

they see Jesus as a weak king, an unloving leader far off in heaven not caring about their situations. Jesus' kingship in the world is unseen. It is the unseen real. It is the real authority that is not yet seen in the world. Yet our hearts, as believers, yearn for the rule of Jesus Christ over the authorities of the earth.

We might have some agreement that those who refuse to cooperate with Jesus and bow to his authority are the source of issues in our societies and maybe our lives. But we need to realize that Jesus is Lord of not just the governments, but of our lives as well. If we say, "Jesus is Lord," then we also need to be those who are trusting in him and have given Jesus authority over our lives and submit to his kingship. We are to be those who have relinquished the throne of our lives and have placed Jesus upon it. As believers, we are to be those who have recognized that Jesus is Lord and acknowledge his Lordship and seek to live as if he is our Lord.

In the Old Testament, we often find the image of a flood as a symbol of the loss of control in our lives. Floods are powerful, overwhelming forces that threaten to sweep us away. When the floods of life come, who do we look to for help? Do we trust Jesus as Lord and praise him in the floods of our lives, or do we see the floods that come as a moment when we need to step in to control our situation and take things into our own hands, into our own authority? Are there floods in our lives today from which we need to release control out of our own hands and give to Jesus? When the floods come, do we look to our own strength and addictions to control the impact of floods? Floods that come into our lives bring anxiety and fear. Look at our reactions as the flood of pandemic swept into our lives in the last year. Look at the flood of gas shortages that swept into our lives this past week. Did we trust Jesus to control these floods or did we take actions in our own strength to deal with that flood? We have seen the lines at the gas station and the bags on the pumps that mark them as empty. What was our response, fear and anxiety and filling of every gas container we own, or praise because we know Jesus is on the throne and has all authority in heaven and earth? We need to take this another step and ask ourselves if there are floods in our lives now, floods that we have not acknowledged to others, forces seemingly beyond our control that seem ready to sweep us away, floods that we are seeking to deal with in our own strength. We need to be reminded that Jesus is Lord and has authority over the floods of our lives. We need to learn to ask ourselves, "Is Jesus king in our lives?" We need to identify the places in our lives where we are sitting on the throne and not Jesus. All of us, if we will be honest, are in recovery. This is a hospital for recovering addicts

who cling to idols and have an over focus on self. It is to our addictions that we look when the floods come and we need to manage the fallout of shame, anger, pain, and brokenness. We turn to things to manage the floods in our lives. Is Jesus king in our lives? Where are the places in our lives where we are on the throne and need to invite Jesus to become king? What about our finances, our relationships, our time, our entertainment, our physical well-being? The list is long. I can't say that I remember the first time I heard this idea of placing Jesus on the throne of our life preached in a sermon. What I can say is that I did not understand how to identify the places in my life where I was trying to sit on the throne in Jesus' place. Over time I have begun to understand that one way for me to identify these areas is to look at where I lead with the skills and talents in my hand instead of following Jesus into where he is working and inviting me to work in his authority and strength. This past week is a good example. This past Tuesday, I went to Lewisetta and walked in the path of the tornado and was just overwhelmed by the cleanup task that lies in front of this small community. My first reaction was to start gathering what assets I have and try to get them to work as best I could. But no matter how I planned to proceed in my own strength, limited knowledge, and abilities, they were not enough to address this overwhelming task. It is then that I began to step back, and pray and ask Jesus to come and lead and bring those under his authority to help. I stepped back and let Jesus lead and stir the hearts of his people to come and help. Yes, I went and worked and used my hands to help, but Jesus stirred the hearts of so many people this past weekend, and I am sure that he will stir more in the weeks to come. Putting Jesus back on the throne of our life is learning to find the places we rush to put ourselves on the throne of our lives in order to control the floods that are impacting us. Instead, we need to learn to stop what we are doing in response to the flood and ask Jesus what he is doing and how we can join with him as he takes authority and allows us to be carried on his shoulders. I don't have a technique that I can share for how to put Jesus on the throne of our lives, but what I am learning is when anxiety and fear creep into my heart, to stop and see if I am looking down on the flood from the throne of my life or if I am looking up to heaven and asking Jesus to take authority of the flood and use me in whatever manner he will. We need to realize that we are in this hospital for recovering throne sitters and would be kings who all need to release our claim on our lives and submit to the authority of Jesus. We are recovering that we might be able to say, "Jesus is Lord," and our lives would reflect those words even in the midst of a flood that is sweeping us away.

Pray with me. Jesus, we are those who have floods in our lives and have turned to things we know to help us control those floods. Jesus, send the Holy Spirit to convict us of the places we are sitting on the throne of our lives and then enable us to repent and step down and allow you to have authority in our lives and guide our lives and be our King. Let us join the chorus who truthfully say, "Jesus is Lord" and give him all authority in our lives. Amen.