

Sermon – May 12, 2024
“Clothed with power from on high”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Luke 24:44-43

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. Make them a blessing for your people that leads them to life eternal and fruitful labor as we abide in you on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Last Thursday was the fortieth day after Easter and, on our Christian calendar, the day when Jesus ascended into heaven. It is a day of great significance in the life of the church, yet these days we let it go by mostly unnoticed. Today in addition to being Mother's Day is Ascension Sunday. Today is the day we remember that after forty days of appearing to his followers and speaking to them about the kingdom of God, Jesus ascended into heaven before their eyes. The disciples were witnesses to Jesus' ascension. Ascension in part defines who we are in Jesus Christ, but it is not often talked about. We do mention the ascension of Jesus every Sunday when we stand together and say the words of the Apostles' Creed. All four of the Gospel writers include the ascension in their account of Jesus, yet I don't recall anyone in my life, when seated around a table enjoying a meal, asking me or others what I thought about the ascension. Let's spend a few moments and join with the disciples sharing in their witness of Jesus's ascension into heaven with the intent of convincing us that the ascension is an event in our lives we should celebrate, as it has significant implications for each

of us. The question we will begin to answer is “What does Jesus’ ascension mean for each of us?” And let me remind us that Jesus has earlier promised to send to his disciples a Comforter who will lead them into all truth after he leaves them. Jesus’ disciples are instructed to wait in Jerusalem until they are filled with power from on high. We should recall that ten days after Jesus’ ascension, on the day of Pentecost (which is next Sunday), Holy Spirit was poured out on Jesus’ disciples. Yes, next Sunday we want to be those who are dressed in bright colors as we also await, anticipate, and recall the coming of Holy Spirit.

Historically, one of the common helps for teaching and helping people to recall key aspects of our faith was the use of a catechism or teachings about the faith usually done in the form of questions and answers. People would use these questions and answers to teach others the fundamentals of faith. The Church moved away from this in the last century, but the use of a catechism is beginning to re-emerge in the Global Methodist Church and other denominations as well. One well known catechism is the Heidelberg Catechism, and if we look at the question about the benefits we receive from Jesus’ ascension found in it, we find three statements: “First, that he is our Advocate in the presence of his Father in heaven. Second, that we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that he, as the Head, will also take us, his members, up to himself. Third, that he sends us his Spirit as a counterpledge by whose power we seek what is above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God, and not things that are on earth”ⁱ

Let’s look at these three statements this morning. On Ascension Day, Jesus led his disciples outside the city, raised his hands, and began to bless them, and as he gave them a blessing, he ascended before their eyes to heaven and was taken up out of their sight. A resurrected Jewish carpenter now sits at the right hand of God, the place of all divine power. Jesus’ resurrected body is taken up to heaven into the presence of God. Jesus is raised up from the earth above all of the patriarchs, angels, and archangels to be seated at the place of divine power. Jesus is exalted above all other powers and lifted above them all. Jesus, who humbled himself and took on human flesh, who suffered, died and was resurrected, is raised up in front of his disciples while his blessing over them is ongoing. There is no mention in the scripture that Jesus completes his blessing, and as we realize his blessing does not end, we might come to understand that Jesus continues to be a blessing for all who believe in him for all time. Now I cannot explain how Jesus is raised up. That is a mystery connected to a resurrected body and God exalting Jesus. But I do want to point out that we are connected to Jesus in faith, and as

such, we also hold the promise that in our resurrection, we too will be raised up with Jesus. And if we pull this thread of Jesus being in us and us in him, we are in some form also currently seated with him at the right hand of God, lifted up and exalted, as that is where Jesus resides until he comes again in power. There at the right hand of God, Jesus is our advocate or intercessor, petitioning God on our behalf. The first thing the ascension means to us is that we have an advocate at the right hand of God the Father. When we have needs, when our hearts are heavy, we are to ask in Jesus' name, and Jesus, who sits at the right hand of God, intercedes for us. He hears our prayers and responds from heaven in power. We have an advocate, Jesus Christ, seated at the right hand of God, to intercede for us.

The second line of the catechism states that "we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that he, as the Head, will also take us, his members, up to himself." Jesus, who took on the flesh of humanity, now resides in heaven. The disciples saw him ascend; they were witnesses to his being taken up and were given the testimony of two angels that they might realize what they were seeing was true. Those who believe in Jesus have the promise that Jesus will also take his own, the members of the body of Christ, to him. The Jewish carpenter in heaven gives us assurance that we who belong to Jesus will be with him where he is. We often will hear words like this spoken at a funeral to comfort and remind us of what it means to our dead ones that Jesus is already in heaven and that they have this promise that they also as followers of Jesus will be with him in heaven. Now we have two points: Jesus in in heaven and intercedes for us there to the Father and his presence in heaven gives us hope that we too will be there with him. We have hope that Jesus will also take us, his body, up to himself.

The third point about ascension is "that [Jesus] sends us his Spirit as a counterpledge by whose power we seek what is above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God, and not things that are on earth." Let me also point out that we know Jesus has made it to heaven at the right hand of God, because in just a few more days Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised his disciples he would send, arrives. In the coming of the Spirit, we receive power from on high to be sent out into all of the world to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, but we also have verification that Jesus is at the right hand of God as he sends from there Holy Spirit. We know that Jesus is in heaven at God's right hand because Holy Spirit has been poured out. The disciples have given us their witness to the coming of Holy Spirit. The scriptures testify to the arrival of Holy Spirit again and again. And across the ages since the arrival of the Spirit, the

disciples of Jesus have received Holy Spirit and in that power the mission of Jesus has and will continue. Now we have our three points of focus for Jesus' ascension: Jesus in heaven and intercedes there for us, his presence in heaven gives us hope that we too will be there with him, and we will receive Holy Spirit power to continue his work on earth and through receiving Holy Spirit, we know Jesus is in heaven blessing us.

Now we have three points we can talk about the next time we come together for table fellowship and to break bread. We can discuss what the ascension means for us. But more than that, we should have a response to these three aspects of the ascension. What should be our response? I am so glad you asked. As the body of Christ here in this place, we receive the same commission that Jesus gave to his disciples at the ascension: we are to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations, starting from the place we are, right here, right now, and we get to be filled with Holy Spirit to enable us to carry out that commission. So, the first thing we are to do in light of ascension is to pray to be clothed with Holy Spirit. We are to wait for that clothing in prayer and praise to God as the disciples did, and to pray for such clothing in joy and expectation. Jesus is in heaven, and he has told us he will send Holy Spirit. Prepare our hearts, ask for, cry out for, anticipate the coming of Holy Spirit into our lives, either for the first time or more fully than we have ever experienced Holy Spirit before. Keep in mind we are not praying for Holy Spirit to be our comforter in our homes or wherever we are, but we are praying for power from on high that enables us to go out into all of the world, starting right here, right now and to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. Ascension is about the body of Christ, the Church, filled with the power of God out in the world sharing the steadfast love of the Lord with those who have no idea that they can repent, be forgiven, and be reconciled to God for eternity. It is us, the body of Christ, in the power of God being the Church sent out into the world, a place that is too often unaware they even need a savior. So first, we, in great joy, are to begin to pray that Jesus will send Holy Spirit to us and wake us up in the power of God to do what the Church is supposed to be doing. Next Sunday, we will celebrate Pentecost, the first outpouring of Holy Spirit on all flesh, but what we really need to be hungering for is to be given the opportunity to celebrate Holy Spirit baptism of every member of this church and their joyful going out to all people in our community and other places the Spirit leads us to share Jesus Christ. That is step one. Are we ready? Then start praying and keep praying in joy and anticipation until we are all clothed with Holy Spirit, the power of the living God. Pray in anticipation that we will all receive

fresh wind and fire from God. And as preparation, next week I will offer again to pray for all who are thirsty for Holy Spirit to receive Holy Spirit, so start praying and don't stop until fire from God falls.

Our next response to the ascension is that when Holy Spirit comes, we are to move! Because of Jesus' ascension into heaven, we are to be praying for Holy Spirit to come and enable us to go and proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sin to all people. We are planning to wear red and other bright colors next Sunday, but if we believe in the power of prayer, we will also come to church with our walking shoes on so that we can be those ready to go and carry the Good News of Jesus Christ out into our community.

But there is more. Because Jesus is in heaven, he is filling all things. In Ephesians 4:10 we find: "He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things." Christ is permeating all things. Christ is out in the world in the dark places, in the places of deepest need, moving in and displacing evil. Jesus waits for Holy Spirit-filled people to hear his voice calling them to follow him and to join him as those enabled with power from on high to bring Good News to all people. We as Christians often miss that Jesus is at work permeating all things. Think of the darkest, most evil, most godless place and realize that Jesus is there permeating that place. We sometimes let our eyes move off of Jesus and onto the sin, despair, and injustice in the world. But Jesus is moving. He did not sit down at the right hand of God to rest. He sits at the place of power to bring forth the kingdom of God in all places. As the disciples waited for the coming of Holy Spirit, they gathered to worship and pray, anticipating the coming of this enabling power from on high so that they might continue Jesus' mission. As we spend this week waiting for Pentecost, take time to worship and pray so that we might be clothed with power from on high and be those sent out and found at work with Jesus, starting right here in our community. One of my seminary professors summarized these three implications of ascension as "Holy of Holy presence, right hand of God power, standing in the gap posture." That might be worth writing on your bathroom mirror so that you can be reminded of it each morning and evening. Because Jesus has ascended into heaven, he has a Holy of Holy presence, a right hand of God power, and a standing in the gap posture, and because we are in Christ, we also have a Holy of Holy presence, right hand of God power, and standing in the gap posture. People, get ready for the coming of fresh fire sent from our resurrected Lord, sitting at

the right hand of the Father. One last time in the Easter season, let us say, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.

Pray with me: Jesus, forgive us when we look to you to restore Israel in this time and place, and wait in silence and fear. Lord, hear our prayer for the Baptism of Holy Spirit. Lord open our hearts to wait in joy and great expectation for the coming of Holy Spirit, and when He comes, to boldly go to all of the world in your power, starting right here in this place and continuing to all the places you will lead us. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Come, Holy Spirit, come and be poured out on all of your people. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Go forth into Jesus' mission as those who know Christ in us has a Holy of Holy Presence, Right Hand of God Power, and a Standing in the Gap Posture.

ⁱ (Q 49; cf. Pearson, EC 1:459). Oden, Thomas C.. *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (p. 485). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition