

The joy of Jesus' Ascension

Sermon for **Ascension**; 5 May 2016

Bible reading: [Acts 1:1-11](#); [Ephesians 1:15-23](#); [Luke 24:44-53](#)

Introduction

Most people find it hard to say goodbye to those they love. Farewells are so often a source of sadness in our life. At first glance, the Ascension of Jesus can 'seem' to be a goodbye story. But if that's the case, there is something very striking in our text. Because notice how the disciples react: '*and they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy*'. Luke 24:53. The Ascension of Jesus is a source of **joy**.

But how so? We don't always find it easy to answer this question. This is partly because the Ascension of Jesus is actually quite a misunderstood part of our Christian faith. What I want to do tonight is share with you the joy of the Ascension, by looking at three myths which are quite commonly held about Jesus' Ascension.

The first myth is that the Ascension of Jesus means he is no longer a human being.

The second myth is that the Ascension means Jesus is no longer active.

The third myth is that the Ascension of Jesus means he is no longer present.

We want to look at the opposite of these myths, to find the joy in his *ongoing* humanity, his *ongoing* activity, and his *ongoing* presence.

Ongoing humanity

So the first myth to deal with is this idea that somehow in the Ascension Jesus *leaves behind* his humanity.

We know that in Jesus the Son of God becomes a human being. We call this the incarnation, don't we? We celebrate it in a big way at Christmas, and I think for the most part we've got that fairly straight. But then somehow in his Ascension we can get the idea that now Jesus sheds his humanity like taking off a coat. People can get the idea that now Jesus is in heaven and is no longer a human being. This is simply not the case. There was no 'Jesus suit' left behind on the mountain where Jesus' ascended.

I think part of the reason we go this way is that ultimately, we're a bit uncomfortable with our own humanity. We think we too want to leave it behind. But God created us 'very good', and he ultimately wants to redeem and glorify our human nature. We believe in the resurrection of the body for us, as well as for Jesus.

We can see that Jesus ascended bodily in our texts. Did you hear the words of the angels to the disciple? '*This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come again in the same way as you saw him go into heaven*'. Acts 1:11. How did the disciples see him go? As a real human being. How then will he come again? As a real human being. How then is he in-between? As a real human being.

In his resurrection Jesus wanted to make this very clear, that he was not a ghost, not just a spirit. He ate fish to prove this. He showed them the nail marks in his hands. He's glorified; yes indeed, Jesus was raised from the dead in a new glorified state, a body of another order if you like, but it was still in his human body that he both rose and ascended.

Now at this point I'd like to draw your attention to our centre window up the front here, which is a depiction of the Ascension. Where Jesus is rightly and clearly depicted in his human body. He is both glorified, but still human. Notice even in this picture the nail marks in his hands and feet.



This has been the teaching of the Christian church right through the centuries, that Jesus retains his humanity into eternity. And it pops up quite a bit in our own Lutheran confessions, allow me to share with you just one example. It says there that we Christians can...

'...rejoice without ceasing in the fact that our flesh and blood is placed so high at the right hand of God's majesty and almighty power. In this way we will certainly find constant consolation in every difficulty...'. (FC SD, VIII, 96)

But why is this good news and consolation? Why is this a source of joy? Well because as Jesus' ascends into heaven in his humanity, he goes as our representative. He goes as our head. He takes, if you like, *your* humanity into heaven, into the very life of God ahead of you. The son of God took on human flesh, so that ultimately, he could bring humanity back to God. Perhaps we can think about this with an analogy.

Some of you would remember the first moon landing of Neil Armstrong and his famous words, *'One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind'*. What was he saying there? He was saying that as big a personal accomplishment as his walking on the moon was, in a sense he was also a representative of all humankind. People felt like this and reportedly said things like, *'we've landed on the moon'*. Humanity had reached into new territory. It was something of a vicarious victory for all. It's really quite mind boggling to look up at the moon and ponder the fact that up there in space are the footprints of a human being – one of us.

Now something a bit like that, but infinitely more wonderful and important, is happening in the Ascension of Jesus. It is a giant leap for humankind. Because now at the centre of deepest heaven, the fountain of all creation, the right hand of God the Father, sits one of us – flesh and blood. So that this is the goal of the human race. We were created to share in the glory of God and reign with him forever. In being exalted, Jesus brings exaltation to all of us.

St Paul can even say that because you are in Christ, you have been seated with Christ in the heavenly places.

His death is your death, his resurrection is your resurrection, and His ascension is your ascension. Now by faith, one day fully revealed.

So there is *joy* in the ongoing humanity of Christ.

Ongoing activity

The second myth is that somehow the Ascension of Jesus means he is no longer *active*.

Sometimes people get the idea that Jesus came to earth to 'do his thing', and he did it well – he lived, he died, he rose for our salvation – but now in his Ascension he sort of 'clocks off'. Jesus hangs up the boots. His work is over and he is no longer active. Maybe we think now it's the Holy Spirit's turn, which is at least partly true, but worse we think now Jesus has done his part the rest is up to us. Once again, this is a myth. The Scriptures teach clearly and emphatically that Christ continues to be active today. And in various ways.

Remember for example that when we pray we say *'through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives **and reigns...**'*. Not 'did' reign, not 'will reign' one day in the future, but who lives and reigns *now*,

today. He's in charge. Christ is actively reigning over this world today as King. But that's just one part. Another key focus of his ongoing activity in his ascension is as our *intercessor*, our advocate, our High Priest. Jesus is the one who continually stands in for us in heaven. In other words it's not only as our King, but also as our saviour, that he is still active.

Now we didn't get this explicitly in our texts tonight, but we did get something which points us in that direction. Did you notice in the Luke reading how Jesus ascended *while* blessing them? This is a High Priestly picture of Jesus. The High Priest was the one who went into God's presence on behalf of the people, and came out to bring God's blessing to the people. So Luke gives us this hint here of Jesus ascending as our High Priest, and this theme then is made a lot of elsewhere in the New Testament. When we say Christ is our mediator, this is an ongoing activity in heaven right now.

So Paul says in Romans that, '*Christ Jesus is that one who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us*'. Present tense. The book of Hebrews says exactly the same thing. And here's the thing, he does that as the flesh and blood human being who offered himself up on the cross and who sympathises with your every weakness. The book of Hebrews even says that part of his mediating work for us is bringing his blood into the heavenly sanctuary. He needs to retain his humanity to do that.

It's one thing to know that Christ reconciled you to God when he died on the cross and rose again from the dead. It's another thing to know that right now tonight, at this moment, no matter what struggle you are facing in life right now, Christ is in heaven interceding for you, praying for you, pleading with the Father on your behalf with the nail marks in his hands. Jesus your ascended Lord has not left it all up to you, He intercedes for you in heaven itself.

So just as there's joy in Jesus' ongoing humanity, so there is joy in his ongoing *activity* as our ascended Lord.

Ongoing presence

Then finally there's joy in Jesus' ongoing *presence* in his ascension, here with us, right now.

The myth here is that people think the ascension means Jesus has gone away. But it doesn't. It can't. Jesus says, '*I am with you always*'. The Ascension is not about the absence of Jesus, but it's about the presence of Jesus in a new way. In fact, in a more powerful and profound way.

Let's just consider a few details in the text. First there's the fact that Jesus is at the 'right hand' of God. The right hand in the ancient world was the hand you did things with, it's the hand of power. So God's 'right hand' is not so much a **place**, but God's power. And God's power is, of course, everywhere. It's the same with this business of 'clouds' and 'heaven'. We read that a cloud withdrew Jesus from their sight. In the Bible clouds are almost always more than just clouds. Like on Mt Sinai and in the wilderness and on the Mount of Transfiguration. Clouds are to do with the presence of God, so that when a cloud withdraws Jesus from their sight, this is not about Jesus going way up there. It's about Jesus entering into the presence of God, which again is everywhere. In his Ascension Jesus has taken his human flesh and entered back into the heavenly realm, so that Jesus, true God and true man, can be with all his people wherever they are. He withdraws his visible presence from that limited place, so he can be invisibly present all at places. Jesus ascends into heaven not to go far away from you, but to be nearer to you.

Just think about it – during Jesus visible life on earth he could only be in one place at one time. He could only heal one person or one group at one time. Because by becoming a human being he had given up, or put aside, his ability to be everywhere. But in his ascension, he now once again 'fills all things'. And we have access to Jesus especially in the life of the church by the power of the Holy Spirit. Notice there's a particular emphasis in the Ascension on Jesus' sending

of the Holy Spirit and how important that is. This presence of Jesus in the church was a special focus of our Ephesians reading, *'That the church is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.'*

And in a sense, this all comes together in this Holy meal we share tonight. Where do we see most clearly that Jesus has retained his humanity in his ascension to heaven, that he is still active as our saviour today, that he is not absent but present? We see this here in Holy Communion. Here our ascended Lord is with us in his body and blood, and so heaven and earth, God and humanity, are brought together with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven.

Conclusion

Jesus hasn't left his humanity behind, our ascended Lord is still God and man in heaven, our flesh and blood *is* now received into the very life of God, so we rejoice.

Jesus hasn't clocked off. Our ascended Lord is still as active as ever, interceding for you in heaven even now, so we rejoice.

And Jesus isn't gone. In his body the church he is present with you by the power of his Holy Spirit, *always*.

And so like the disciples, we rejoice!

God grant it for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer