

We Follow Christ
May 13th, 2015

Ephesians 4:7-16
Ascension B

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The Ascension of Christ never really gets the notoriety of our other Christian festivals, does it? I mean, certainly, it can't compare to Christmas or Easter; those are so popular that pretty much everyone knows about them, Christian or not. But even compared to other festivals the world might not know so well, like the upcoming Pentecost, it just seems like the Ascension doesn't quite get the attention it ought to. Is it because we celebrate it during the week and not on a Sunday? Maybe. Or maybe it has to do with the content. After all, what do we celebrate at the Ascension except Jesus leaving this Earth visibly? His *ascending* into heaven. At first glance that doesn't seem like something worth celebrating, it seems like something we would lament! We haven't gained something, we've lost something!

But of course, that's just what it looks like at first. Dig under that first impression and you see that not only do we benefit from the ascension of Jesus, but it is also just as vital to our days here and now as the upcoming Pentecost. Our focus as a church body is on Jesus and his work for us. Easter is the day around which the entire church year revolves. And rightly so! Easter and everything leading up to it from Christmas on provide for our eternal well-being. We absolutely need that. And we need that before anything else.

But the Ascension and its partner Pentecost provide for our lives here and now as Christians. We look forward to our eternity with God, but we each have an earthly life to live out before that day comes. And Jesus does not fly away into the sky saying, "See ya when you get here!" and leave us to fend for ourselves until then. The Ascension sets the stage for a life where we follow Christ completely. St. Paul illuminates this in our epistle reading for this evening: <Read text: Eph 4:7-16>.

Now, when I say that "we follow Christ," perhaps a short scoff or "duh" went off in your head. After all we are Christians. We build our church and our very faith on the rock of Christ. Of course we follow him. But even though that's true, that's only looking at the statement in one sense, and I'd like to look at it in a few others, particularly the ones Paul speaks of and implies here in our reading.

First of all, and absolutely most importantly, when Paul reminds us that Christ's Ascension was preceded by his descending here to earth. This brings to mind the entire path that Christ followed to reach the Ascension and also reminds us that we follow Christ on that path. It was he who gave up all that he was, came down here and lived in your place and when the time was right gave that life willingly for you on the cross. He died for you. And then he rose, he gave you that proof of life after death, proof that what he sacrificed the Father accepted on our behalf. We are promised that he is just the firstfruits from the dead. And then, as we saw tonight, he ascended into heaven.

We follow Christ on this path. We live our earthly, human lives in his wake. And when they are finished, our time here ends. We die. But though we follow, our experience is not the same. Because Christ forged the path, he went first and he bore the brunt of what was standing in the way. He died our death for our sin, and the death that comes for each of us now is but a sleep. The terror and pain of it is removed because Christ endured it before we got there. We sleep for a time, and then like him, we will wake. His resurrection is a promise that we will follow him. And when we wake, reunited body and soul, we will be taken to heaven with him. This is our joy and our comfort, the rock on which we build the rest of our lives. This is the promise; that the path Christ blazed for us, we will follow and it leads to a good end. Everything we think and do with the rest of our time here is done with this truth as the foundation.

But even now in the rest of our earthly lives we follow Christ in another sense. Paul here speaks of the victory celebration that Christ held after his resurrection. He likens it to the ancient victory parades that would be held when a hero returned in triumph to his home city. Christ led the captives of death and hell in his train and he gave gifts to men as part of his celebration. We are the recipients of these gifts. Many of the gifts we think of are given the same to us all, specifically the ones we have just finished talking about; the forgiveness of sins, faith and eternal life. But the gifts we have here and now, we all receive gifts, but we do not all receive the same gifts.

Paul tells us here that, "**to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.**" (v7). This is not the common use of the word "grace" that we think of. We usually use the term to describe the general attitude of God towards us,

that he loves us without our deserving. But here Paul is referring to the grace of our individual earthly gifts and callings. These too are acts of grace on God's behalf. We do not deserve any of these gifts any more than we deserved a Savior. We each have what God, in his grace, has decided is best to give us. Without going too far afield this means, in short, that we have no right to complain about what we receive from God, or to be jealous of what he has decided to give someone else, and not ourselves.

Those kind of attitudes come from the old self. The selfish self. The new self, instead, looks at what God has given us in his grace and looks then to follow Christ's lead in giving you these gifts. Let me elaborate on that a bit. When was the last time you reminded yourself of why you are still here? If you don't know the answer to that off the top of your head, you should probably think about that a little more often. You see, you don't need to be here for yourself anymore, right? You have faith. You trust Jesus. Your sins are forgiven and heaven is your home. You have gotten everything you need out of this earthly life, so why are you still here?

You are here to use the gifts that Christ has given you to accomplish his good purpose. Paul says it best here, **"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."** (v11-13). Your gifts are given to you to benefit the Church. And I don't mean this building or just your congregation. I mean Church with a capital "C", the entire body of Christ. Those earthly gifts of grace, your time, your talents and your treasures are given so that you can accomplish the mission Christ gave the church at his Ascension. The mission to build up the believers in the truth of God's word, and to take that word into the world so that more may be added to the number of saints. In short, to grow and go. That is why you are here. And that is the purpose for which Jesus gave you these gifts.

But as I said, we don't all have the same gifts. Only some are given to be pastors or teachers. Paul lists many other gifts in his other letters. It's up to you to determine which gifts God has decided for you. Don't look down on gifts like prayer or encouragement just because they're not as public as preaching or teaching. Each member of the body is as vital as Paul reminds us here, **"From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."** (v16). All the parts carry out their assignments and together they accomplish this great goal of growing and going. Take the time to figure out your gifts that Christ has given you. And then follow Christ's lead in giving them to you. Use them! He knew what he was doing when he gave you what you have. Don't despise the gifts you have. Don't lament the gifts you don't. And don't be jealous of the gifts other were given. Instead, look with joy on the gifts Christ gave you in his grace and use them to his glory with equal joy. In love he has given us gifts to use and opportunities to use them and still grants us the privilege of deciding how best to use them in our lives.

By all of us doing this together we follow the example that Christ left for us. Of a life devoted to God and his truth in perfect unity. In doing this we will become mature, no longer infants, no longer tossed about by the world, no longer led astray by the craft and deceit of men. In this life we strive to grow, to be more Christ-like each day. By listening to him, by learning from him in his Word, we are given the strength and power of the Holy Spirit day by day to grow. And day by day we are refreshed with continuing forgiveness for the times we fail. And all the while we keep our eyes focused on the great prize to come, the eternal life when we will fully obtain that unity with God and each other that Christ promised us through his own ascension. We will perfectly realize that dream of unity that we strive for here and now, with each member of the body working together in perfect harmony, united entirely with Christ as the head. Again we follow Christ, knowing that where he has gone, we each will follow someday.

Brothers and sisters, know that you follow Christ. You follow the path he forged for us to eternal life, the path where he conquered sin and death for you. You follow the life he has laid out for you here and now, using the gifts he has given you to understand your purpose here and now. And someday you will follow Christ on to heaven, to the perfect eternity he has prepared for each one of us. Ascended together, united with him, we will follow Christ. Amen.