



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Ascension Day

#### Lifted Up

[RCL] Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 or Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

In early 2011 there were billboards plastered across the nation warning of Judgment Day on May 21, 2011, with the words, “The Bible guarantees it.” This was the day that had been predicted as Christ’s second coming by Pastor Harold Camping of Family Radio. Pastor Camping was so convinced of the date from his reading of the Bible, and he had attracted so many followers to this belief, that over \$100 million dollars was spent on a nationwide advertising campaign for it. Clearly, he was wrong, although Camping later claimed a spiritual judgment had actually taken place that day (which presumably would have been helpful information to have had earlier).

The campaign was a rather strange one given that the Scriptures are quite clear, including in the lesson appointed for today from Acts 1, that no one can know the day or hour of Christ’s return. In today’s text, we read the disciples asking Jesus about the end times and Jesus states, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” Still, many religious groups continue to try and predict “Judgment Day.” In fact, one Biblical scholar named Ian Gurney believes that Armageddon began in 1999 and so Judgment Day will happen in 2023. It seems clear that we humans deeply desire to know what is going to happen and when it is going to happen. Rather than living in radical trust and faith in God about an open and unknown future, we frequently focus on what we think we know and can control and may find ourselves getting stuck on the wrong thing.

Today, we commemorate the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. This event is believed to have occurred 40 days following Jesus’ resurrection. It was necessary for Jesus to ascend to heaven, Jesus said, so that the Holy Spirit could descend upon Jesus’ followers at Pentecost. Yet even as soon as the Ascension occurred, we read that Jesus’ followers got stuck and focused on the wrong thing. Notice that after Jesus ascended, his disciples remained there, standing in place, looking, and gazing up into heaven. Two angels had to come and intervene according to the text, and asked them, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” and commended them on their way back to Jerusalem.

It is ironic to note, then, that we humans are still stuck on that spot where Jesus ascended, despite the message of the angels. In fact, if you visit the Holy Land today, you can go to the place where it is believed that Jesus actually ascended on the Mount of Olives. There is a shrine that has been built around the

imprint of a foot: and it is deeply held by many that it is the footprint of Jesus' right foot, his last point of physical contact with the earth. This spot has been fought over by Christians, Christian groups, and Muslims over the centuries. The chapel that was built and surrounds the footprint has been destroyed and erected time and time again. Today it is called the Chapel of the Ascension, and it's a spot that both Christian and Muslim pilgrims travel to see and revere as a holy place by offering their worship and prayers. While it sounds like an interesting place to visit, even if this were the actual footprint of Jesus, do any of us really believe that Jesus would want us to spend so much time focused on his footprint, fighting over and about it, and vying for control over that little spot of earth? This sounds more like material for a Monty Python skit than a spiritual experience, especially in light of the angel's original message: "Move on!"

But while this shrine to a footprint and Pastor Harold Camping and his followers may seem like extreme examples, they clearly reveal something that is true about all of us as humans. We really do spend our time – way too much of our time – stuck, simply looking in the wrong direction instead of living by faith in what God's Holy Spirit is calling us to do. We can probably all think of times and ways in which the churches we know and love have spent weeks, months, or even years fighting about trivial things from the color of the carpet to who will have access to our buildings to how exactly to take Communion. It's not that we don't have to make decisions about important practical realities, it's just that we can so easily get stuck there and invest our time, energy, focus, and money on things that matter comparatively little.

We do this in the church, but we also do this in our own personal lives as well. We can allow ourselves to be drawn into unnecessary distractions so easily, whether it's social media or some drama occurring among our friends or family, or simply our own attempts to control and manage the challenges we face. Rather than focusing and living out the radical invitation of Jesus to live by faith as disciples called into an unknown and open future by God's Holy Spirit, we stand in place, gazing in the wrong direction.

If the Ascension isn't about worshipping a footprint or controlling the future, then what is it about? The Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer states: "What do we mean when we say that he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father?" Answer: "We mean that Jesus took our human nature into heaven where he now reigns with the Father and intercedes for us."

This aligns with what our Eastern Orthodox friends are quick to point out: that the Ascension is the very culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation. In other words, it is precisely because Jesus' body is no longer confined to earth that his body can be mystically located in us, as the Church, the "Body of Christ." The Ascension teaches us that the Incarnation continues in each one of us, as members of Christ's Body who have been filled with the Holy Spirit. While on earth, Jesus could only be at one place at one time; now, Jesus is present everywhere both in heaven, interceding for us, and in all of his followers, throughout the entire world.

By ascending, the disciples of Jesus were enabled to take up Christ's call to receive the power of the Holy Spirit and to become witnesses of Christ's love and saving power to the very ends of the earth. As

followers of Jesus, we lead lives full of meaning and importance and we can abandon ourselves in faith to what God is doing in and among us by God's Spirit. We have been given the chance to be Christ's Body here on earth and to bring the love of God in Jesus to all people, wherever we go, in every moment of every day: in the grocery store, in traffic, at home, at work, while serving the hungry, while tucking a child into bed, hugging an old friend, visiting the sick, sewing a quilt, laughing with a neighbor, or comforting one who suffers. Jesus is present in all of it. Even when we get stuck for a time, even when we start staring in the wrong direction, even when we lose our way or purpose, Christ is present to draw us back onto the path, so that we can step boldly into an unknown and open future with God by our side.

Ascend and lift up your hearts to the Lord today. We are the Body of Christ here on earth and we can do great things when we live by faith focused on Jesus. Thanks be to God!

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