

Ascension Day
May 5, 2016
Acts 1:1-11

“Going Up and Going Out”

Our church year follows the life of Jesus, but today, Ascension Day, is one of those forgotten festivals of the church year. It shouldn't be, but it is. We focus on Jesus' birth, his life of ministry, his suffering, death, and resurrection. But what about that event which took place 40 days after Jesus rose from the dead – his ascension? In worship last Sunday, I made mention of the ascension in the children's message and sermon. Following the late service, a guest who was visiting our congregation commented to me that her church doesn't make mention of this at all. She wondered why this was so, and sounded like she was going to be following up with her pastor about this. I think we overlook this great gift of Jesus' ascension and what this means for us as his disciples. This evening, I want to consider this briefly under the theme “Going Up and Going Out.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

So what's the deal with Jesus ascending up into the sky? Luke records this both in his first book, the Gospel that bears his name, and his second book, the Acts of the Apostles, and we heard both of these accounts this evening in the Scripture lessons. Science and technology have enabled us human beings to send satellites, space ships, even people, into outer space. Astronauts have not yet reported running into the ascended Christ in their space travels. So what does this mean? Luke record that Jesus did indeed ascend into heaven, so there surely was some kind of going up here: **“... he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they gazing up into heaven as he went, behold two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven’”** (Acts 1:9b-11). That word “up” is used three times! Clearly, the disciples knew up from down, but is there a deeper meaning here? The answer is a resounding yes! What if we understood Jesus' ascension less in spatial terms and more in theological terms? I am certainly not seeking to contradict the witness of Scripture, so please don't go home and post on social media that Pastor Meehan is a heretic. Could it be that *up* is less about the direction Christ ascended and more about that He is the highest and above the entire cosmos? This is what Paul is talking about in the Second Reading from Ephesians for this Ascension Day where we are told that **“the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory... seated him [Jesus] at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fill all in all”** (Ephesians 1:17a, 20b-23). This is the important truth of our crucified and risen Savior's going up – his ascension, which we confess in the creed: “... he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

Now what about the second part of the theme for this homily: “Going Out?” I don't mean here “going out” is in going out on a date, but with Jesus' going up there follows a “going out” of his disciples even as Jesus tells them and us: **“...But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”** (Acts 1:8) and **“...repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high”** (Luke 24:47-49). Following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the disciples are to go out deliberately and boldly into the world and tell the good news of Jesus, calling all people to faith in him. We follow in the train of those first disciples. In fact, I would submit to you that we are technically

apostles! The word “apostle” (ἀποστέλω) literally means “one who is sent,” and so we are – sent into the Jerusalems, Judeas, and Samarias of our own lives as we follow our crucified, risen, and ascended Savior and join Jesus on his mission. But you see, there can be no “going out” unless there is first a “going up.” This is why Jesus’ ascension is so critically important for church and ministry, and especially missions.

And so on this Ascension Day, because there was indeed a “going up,” let us rejoice and give thanks for this saving truth of Christ our Savior. But let us also never forget that He now calls us to a “going out” until the day when He comes again. Our going out doesn’t have to take us to far off places on the other side of the world. Remember what Jesus said: “... **you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth**” (Acts 1:8). Jerusalem is our own backyard; our street and neighborhood; where we live. That’s our closest mission field. Judea is a bit beyond that and includes places that are nearby: where we work, shop, go to school. That’s our next closest mission field. Samaria includes those places beyond this – farther out, but not so far removed: places where we may travel for business, to visit family or friends. And beyond these are those places that may take us “to the end of the earth.” Think of these as concentric circles that surround our home. This is where Jesus calls us to join him on his mission.

To strengthen us in our going out, our crucified, risen, and ascended Savior now comes to us right here in this holy Supper where He comes to meet us and give us his very Body and Blood. Though He has indeed gone up, He still comes to us now to forgive, renew, strengthen, and bless his going out people until the day He comes again. Amen.