



SERMONS THAT WORK

Ascension Day

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

On Power

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

“When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Today is the celebration of the feast of the Ascension. The book of Acts tells us that after Jesus’s resurrection, he spent forty days with the apostles. Then, after ordering them to wait for the Holy Spirit, he ascended into heaven. Quite a lot happens in only a few verses. Wrapped up in this story—given to us by the same author in both Luke and Acts—are bigger messages about the Holy Spirit, power, and the church. The passage offers a vital lesson about the nature of who God is.

In today’s epistle reading, we find an explicit link between Jesus’s place at God’s right hand and the power he wields. The author of Ephesians prays that the church in Ephesus will come to know “the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at the 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 age to come.” This is lofty language, describing not just Jesus, but a vision of what is to come. Authority, power, and dominion—one would be hard-pressed to find language that soars higher than this in claiming for Christ a position of privilege and significance. The narrative of Christ’s ascension—and the theology behind it—speaks directly to how the church is meant to understand these concepts of power.

The moment of the Ascension is a narrative act. It tells us where Jesus has gone: He has ascended to the right hand of God. But as the epistle explains, this is not merely a statement about cartographical coordinates. Jesus has not just gone “up.” It is primarily a theological statement about power and the Holy Spirit. The Ascension—and Jesus’s relocation to the right hand of God the Father—are eschatological events that break the church out of the natural flow of time and order, into a different mode of being in the world.

To understand what this means for the church today, it is important for us to clarify what it does *not* mean. The Ascension is not an affirmation that the church should seize earthly power. In Dostoyevsky’s famous book *The Brothers Karamazov*, he tells a parable known as The Grand Inquisitor. In this parable, Jesus

returns to 16th-century Spain, where he performs miraculous healings. However, the Grand Inquisitor quickly has the miracle worker arrested and thrown into prison. Visiting the jail, the Inquisitor embarks on a lengthy, impassioned speech while his prisoner remains silent, not saying a word.

Bragging, the Inquisitor explains that the church had dramatically scaled up what Jesus had proclaimed to a mere few. He explains, “We took from him Rome and the sword of Caesar, and proclaimed ourselves sole rulers of the earth...” Humankind, he explains, longs to be treated in a paternalistic manner. Humans want to be ruled over as a harmonious ant-heap. Implicit within the Inquisitor’s diatribe is a theology that teaches that the church ought to wield earthly power to compel humans to conform to its vision of morality and religion. In this fictional vision for the church, Jesus’s ascension and reign at the right hand of God offered license for the church to operate using the tools of earthly empire.

But Jesus’s reign is not defined by earthly analogies of power. Rather, Jesus redefines what kingship means. Jesus redefines what ascension means.

Theologian Willie James Jennings writes, in his commentary on Acts: “Jesus, however, is not a sign of resurrection. He is its Lord. Resurrection will not define him. He will define resurrection’s meaning and resurrection’s purpose. It will not be used by these disciples as an ideological tool for statecraft.”

Ascension will not define Jesus. Rather Jesus defines *ascension’s* meaning and purpose. He is its lord. Jesus defines what power is and models how power is to be wielded.

A common refrain in churches is that the poor disciples were off the mark in their conception of a Messiah: the real Messiah, so this narrative goes, was not about political or earthly power. However, New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa reminds readers that the disciples are only half mistaken in their expectation for a Messiah who is an earthly ruler of Israel. In Acts 1, when the disciples ask when the kingdom will be restored, Jesus does not chide them for misconstruing what the Messiah is. Indeed, the author of Luke-Acts states in chapter one of the gospel that that Jesus will be given the throne of David. This is a political statement about earthly power. The disciples’ mistake is in their assumption that the resurrection is an immediate prelude to political success. As the Ephesians passage says, all things will come under the reign of Jesus. But it is not for us to make this happen. The question then becomes about timing. If God is not commanding the church to seize earthly, political power now, what kind of power is to be wielded?

The answer to this question is in Jesus’s answer to the disciples about time: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The message of the gospel is not a mandate to seize political power. It is a message of bearing witness to who Jesus is. It is a message of renewal, resurrection, and forgiveness. Jesus is sending the disciples throughout the world, but not to exert political control. The gospel is a message of an eschatological event of redemption—not a strategy for immediate solutions. The message of the gospel is that even now, in this in-between time of the already-and-not-yet, there is hope, joy, and love in God.

This does not mean that eschatological promise has no bearing on the here and now. On the contrary, the message of the feast of Ascension is a call to examine our own hearts and institutions. Has the church let human understandings of ascension shape our understanding of Jesus? Or have we let Jesus redefine what ascension means for the church?

At the end of Dostoyevsky's parable of the Grand Inquisitor, the prisoner remains silent throughout the entire ordeal. Finally, the prisoner approaches the Inquisitor and kisses him. Moved, the Grand Inquisitor opens the door, and the captive walks out into the darkness. We are told: "The kiss glows in his heart, but the old man adheres to his idea."

In just a week and a half, the church will celebrate the great feast of Pentecost, remembering the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has come upon the church. Like the kiss of the prisoner, it glows in our hearts. Today, let us consider whether we still adhere to human conceptions of power. Or, if we will follow the example of Jesus, who used his power in humility, self-emptying, and love for the least of these. When we follow this example, we, too, ascend into a vision of kingdom and power that flows from the right hand of God.

Amen.

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