

Sermon Luke 24:44-53, Ephesians 1:15-23, Acts 1:1-11
Feast of the Ascension, Sunday, May 24, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from our crucified, risen and ascended Lord and friend, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Once again in this most unusual year, I find myself wondering how to preach on the ascension of our Lord Jesus during a pandemic, when we cannot gather like the disciples did and worship our Lord in person. I couldn't resist thinking, as the opening scripture from the book of Acts told us that, "*as the disciples were watching, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*" Does this mean that Jesus now reigns in the internet cloud on Zoom? How unknowingly prophetic! Sorry, I couldn't resist sharing that thought!

Despite the penchant for bad ascension day puns, the day leads us to an exploration of the purpose and use of God's *power* in and through Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We read in our first lesson how Jesus had suffered humiliation and died on a Roman cross (a unique use of power by the Savior of the World), and then raised from the dead – which certainly shows God's power over death). Then, after forty days appearing to his disciples, Jesus gathered them together on a mountain outside Jerusalem, Jesus was taken up into the clouds of heaven, another sign of the power of God.

But before Jesus ascended, his disciples asked him if THIS was the time that he would restore the kingdom to Israel – in other words, remove their Roman occupiers. That is the power they had expected from the Messiah of God. But Jesus said "it is not for you to know God's timing!" "*But 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.*" Then, as they were watching, Jesus was lifted up into the heavens. While they watched, two angels suddenly appeared and asked them "*why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Jesus will come again in the same way he is going now.*" Perhaps the disciples spent too much time gazing upward, after Jesus was already ascended. Even today, we may spend too much time ourselves gazing at the heavens, wondering if God is really there, or at the ceilings of our churches and cathedrals, thinking that this is the place where Jesus is present – "in God's house". But Jesus is present wherever two or three are gathered in his name, as he promised, in the bread and wine of the eucharist, and even in our hearts of faith, wherever we are.

The power from God that Jesus spoke of in the scripture was the power of the Spirit, which would be given to his followers in order to *be his witnesses*. It was the power to testify to what God had done in Jesus, not only to raise Jesus

from the dead, but also to tell others how the love of God and the mercy and forgiveness of sins that we receive through Christ have the power to change our lives – both as individuals, as churches, and for all the children of God. Because so much of the conversation in our state and in the world these days has been about “power”, it’s time for us to talk about power in the Church. So what is “power”?

The word power comes from the word “*poder*” in Spanish. It literally means “the ability to act” – to get something done. Power in itself is actually neutral – it is not good or bad, though it can be used for evil or for good. Oftentimes we Christians avoid talking about power, because we have heard that “power is the root of all evil”, or how those in authority have used power to manipulate people, force them to do what they don’t do, or use it for their own selfish interests. So we often mistrust political power. We have certainly seen power misused recently as the president pushes to “open churches” for worship as well as open the economy while COVID-19 is still in full pandemic and people are getting sick and dying. Archbishops and some church leaders are pushing their political power to move our governor to open churches for worship before it is safe, while many other faith leaders aren’t even included in the discussion. We are witnesses to the misuse and abuse of power every day of our lives, some much more than others.

So the story of the ascension of Jesus into heaven is a story of God’s power to give Jesus authority and power in this world, over that of any human being. The church has made this one of its primary festivals, to proclaim that Jesus is Lord – not the Roman emperor or any king, dictator or president, leader of the free world, or whoever makes such claims of authority or power.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, the apostle Paul thanked the people for their faith, and prayed that God would give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that they would know “*what is the hope to which he has called you...and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. For God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him 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...and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church.*”

Sometimes it certainly doesn’t look like God has power in this world, or even that Jesus is the head of the Church – when goodness seems powerless over evil, when we are helpless in the face of this pandemic, and faith leaders don’t stand up to politicians, even on matters of faith! But the power Jesus has been given by God is different than any kind of power we have ever seen. I don’t mean the miracles of Jesus only, but his *power to transform our lives with the gospel* – the good news of God’s love for every human being. The greatest power of God in

Jesus was to give his life out of love so that all of us will live – and his greatest commandment was “*to love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*” The power of love is described by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, when he said, “*love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*” So it is by God’s love in Christ that we are transformed, and it is through our love for others that God transforms the world. God’s love is the greatest power in the world, as we see it exemplified in Jesus.

So on the day that Jesus ascended into heaven, we heard in Luke’s gospel that Jesus gathered his disciples on a mountain and opened their minds to understanding the scriptures, about the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms. He told them how it had been written that the promised Messiah for whom they had waited, was now fulfilled in a whole different way than expected. The Messiah was to suffer and die and rise from the dead, and then repentance and forgiveness of sins be proclaimed to all nations. This is where they would come in, as Jesus sent his disciples out to bear witnesses to all these things. They should wait for him in the city till they would be “clothed with power from on high” – on Pentecost, with the Holy Spirit’s power. Then Jesus withdrew from them, and was carried up into heaven. They worshiped him there, on the mountain, before they returned to Jerusalem. And then they waited, inside, for this power to come. When the Holy Spirit did come, they went outdoors and began their witness....

So there seems to be some confusion in communities of faith as to what our essential work is, and today, whether we, “the Church” are essential to the world. According to our commission from Jesus, our essential work doesn’t end with worship – it continues in our witness of love for our neighbors. Our witness to God’s power of love in the person of Jesus Christ, and his presence with us in our lives – in all things – is our “essential” work as Christians and as Churches. So I quote from the Bishop-elect of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Missouri, African American pastor Deon K. Johnson, who “nailed it” when he said: “*The work of the church is essential. The work of caring for the lonely, the marginalized, and the oppressed is essential. The work of speaking truth to power and seeking justice is essential. The work of being a loving, liberating, and life-giving presence in the world is essential. The work of welcoming the stranger, the refugee and the undocumented is essential. The work of reconciliation and healing and caring is essential. The church does not need to “open” because the church never “closed”. We who make up the Body of Christ, the Church, love God and our neighbors and ourselves so much so that we will stay away from our buildings until it is safe. We are the Church.*” Thanks be to God. Amen.