

In the name of our risen and ascended Lord, dear friends in Christ,

If I were to ask you “*What’s the big deal about Good Friday?*” you would, no doubt, say something like, “*What’s the big deal about Good Friday?! That’s the day that Jesus—the sinless Son of God—gave his life on the cross as a payment for the world’s sin! He defeated sin! We have forgiveness because of what our Savior did on Good Friday!*” And if you said something like that, you’d be right.

If I were to ask you “*What’s the big deal about Easter?*” you would, no doubt, say something like, “*What’s the big deal about Easter?! That’s the day that Jesus rose from the dead just as he promised he would do! He defeated death and he promises that we will also!*” And if you said something like that, you’d be right.

If I were to ask you “*What’s the big deal about Christ’s Ascension?*” you would, no doubt, say...well, what would you say? If you’re not exactly sure what you would say, or if you’re not too confident that you know why the Ascension is a big deal, then God has something for you this morning in the words of Ephesians chapter 4, verses 7-16. And if you think you do know it all, I’ll simply ask you to listen anyway and be strengthened in what you believe as we look at

THE BLESSINGS OF THE ASCENSION

Here is what Paul says in Ephesians 4:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) 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.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 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.

The first BLESSING OF THE ASCENSION is that we are assured that Christ completed his work on earth just as it had been foretold. He really is the Savior.

The Apostle explains that Jesus, who descended into this world to be our Savior, also ascended back into heaven: **What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.** God’s Son, Jesus Christ, came down to do his atoning work as our Savior and then returned to heaven.

We should remember that Jesus' work of redeeming us was complete with this death and resurrection. Sin had been paid for, the devil had been dealt with, and death proved powerless over him. Because of Jesus, we have forgiveness of sins, no fear of the devil, and the promise of heaven through faith in him. But after Jesus' resurrection on Easter, there were a few things for him to do before returning to his Father's side in heaven. You remember some of them:

- He gave assurance to his disciples, including "doubting Thomas," in the locked room.
- He walked along the road with the Emmaus disciples, explaining the Scriptures to them.
- He provided a miraculous catch of fish for the disciples, ate breakfast on the beach with them, and then reinstated Peter, asking the disciple if he loved him and commanding him to feed his sheep (his people).

These were all important things that Jesus needed to do. He spent the 40 days after his resurrection completing the earthly training of his disciples.

Some of you have recently graduated; others of you have been attending commencement ceremonies and graduation parties. Well, in a way, the disciples were graduating from Jesus' training and the Lord gave them their commencement address on the Mount of Olives. His final words to them before he returned to heaven were these: **"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7-8.)"** And then he left them, rising through the clouds into heaven.

We consider Jesus' ascension a completion of his work on earth because of what the Apostle Paul says here. He saw in Christ's ascension a fulfillment of Scripture from Psalm 68: **"When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men."** Another way of saying it is that he "led captivity captive" when he ascended on high. Sin and death and the devil—the things that held us captive—no longer do because Jesus took care of every one of them. HE took THEM captive! Elsewhere in Scripture his work is pictured this way: **And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).** The picture of "his train" or "a public spectacle" is that of a victory parade where the captives are trailing behind in chains as evidence of victory. So the image with Christ's ascension is that the battle is over, the victory is won, and Jesus now rises to heaven as the conquering Savior.

The first BLESSING OF THE ASCENSION is that we see the fulfillment of God's promises concerning the Savior as his earthly work is complete and his victory is shown as he rises to heaven. It is truly a BLESSING to see Jesus as the promised Savior who has done everything we needed—just as Scripture promised.

The second BLESSING OF THE ASCENSION detailed by Paul is the beginning of Christ's work for us in heaven as the Lord of the Church.

You'll often hear people say that they are against "organized religion." And they say those words as if they are the most foul-mouthed cursing you've ever heard: "*organized religion.*" I would imagine that some of you here this morning have felt that way or maybe do right now. If you do kind of think that—that "organized religion" is something to be despised and avoided, there is something here that can change your mind—unless you're just too stubborn! Jesus instituted "organized religion" as far as Christianity goes! Listen to this: **It was he (Jesus) 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.**

Do you see it?! He makes some leaders and he speaks of a body of believers learning and working together. What does that sound like to you? ORGANIZED RELIGION! You can't say, "*I don't need anyone to tell me what the Bible means, I can do it on my own.*" If that were true, we wouldn't need apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors and teachers! You can't say, "*I don't need anyone else; I don't need other Christians around me!*" If that were true, Christ himself wouldn't speak of believers forming a "body" or being united! Frankly, our sinful nature is getting in the way if we're thinking like that because those attitudes are at odds with Christ's plan for the Church.

Jesus had once told his disciples, who were saddened to hear Jesus talk of his impending death: **Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor (that is, the Holy Spirit) will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you (John 16:6-8).** Jesus told them that he could not send the Holy Spirit to aid them in their work unless he went back into heaven. The way it had to work was for him to die, then rise, then ascend. Then the Spirit would come and fill those who were called into these ministry positions. His ascension was necessary for this to happen and so this "organized religion" is one of the BLESSINGS OF THE ASCENSION which Christ oversees from heaven.

And what does God say is the goal, the purpose, of these positions? Verse 12 says **to prepare God's people for works of service** and verse 13 says so that **we all reach unity in the faith...and become mature.** And verse 14 says to that we won't be **tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching.** Jesus wants all that and has arranged things in the church so that can happen. If you want to argue about "organized religion," you're going to have to take it up with God because Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to make it happen this way and the Spirit does it so that these good things can be accomplished for the salvation of souls. Of course, I pray that you don't argue with Jesus about it, but instead see the blessings the ascended Christ sends through his church.

And finally, there is one more BLESSING OF THE ASCENSION according to these words. Because Christ has returned to heaven and sends the Holy Spirit, you also get to serve!

It's not just those who are pastors and teachers and the like who serve. You notice in verse 15 Paul turns his attention to each individual believer as he talks about what WE will do because Christ and the Spirit have built and strengthened the body of believers: **Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 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.**

You know that God's grace—his undeserved love—extends to all people. But you also must understand that his grace is poured out in particular ways upon each individual believer. The first words of our text talk about that and so do the last verses. He decides what gifts to give to whom and how people will serve. So if God provides people to prepare us for works of service, who are we to decide we don't need these people? This could sound weird coming from a guy who is a pastor, but I hope not because it's really what God says here: Who are we to say that we don't need a pastor to prepare us to serve? Also, who are we to decide that we don't want to serve God with our abilities? Who are we to be unconcerned about our brothers and sisters in the body of believers? Who are we to think that we can get along with hearing God's Word in worship, Bible study or reading on our own—as if we'll be fine without a good dose of it, as if we can mature without it? Oh, I would imagine we can each see where our attitudes and actions have not been totally in line with God's will. We have sinned in these areas and we probably never even connected these kinds of sins with Christ's ascension, but in a way they are connected because it is the ascended Lord who guides his church and sends his Spirit upon the Church.

How blessed we are to know and love our crucified, risen and ascended Lord who not only rules over the church, but also rules over our hearts. We go to him with repentant hearts, trusting that we are forgiven of these and all sins. We are renewed by the Spirit through his words this morning. We are given new hearts and minds today that see the BLESSINGS OF THE ASCENSION, including the way that Christ oversees his church from his Father's side. From there he prepares us to speak the truth of the gospel, to be loving toward others as we do that, to grow in our faith, to do our part—that is, find our way to serve—for the support and the good of Christ's body, which is the Church. When we do these things we give glory to our ascended Lord! And that is really our desire, isn't it—to give glory to Christ in all we do?

It is my prayer that when you recall the Ascension of Jesus it is more than just—“*Oh, Jesus had to go back to heaven because that's where he came from.*” That's true, of course, but there are also BLESSINGS that come from his Ascension. The first is that Christ finished all his earthly work, assuring us that he indeed is the Savior. The second is that with his Ascension, he began his work of ruling over the Church by sending the Holy Spirit. The third is that as Christ in heaven sends his Spirit, he has included you in the important work of his kingdom. Rejoice with me today in the BLESSINGS OF CHRIST'S ASCENSION. Amen.