

SERMON TITLE: "I Believe Jesus Ascended" (in *The Apostles' Creed* series)

SERMON TEXT: Acts 1:1-11

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: February 3, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

My maternal grandmother was born in England. When she was nine years old, her family migrated to Alberta, Canada. She eventually made her way to Montana and U.S. citizenship after marrying an American. One of the small, but cherished, things I inherited from my grandma was a little metal box in which she used to keep her postage stamps. Because Grandma wrote me lots of letters, I associate that stamp box with many warm feelings.

The little metal box was special to Grandma because, on the lid, it had a picture of Queen Elizabeth II. The box had been made and sold as a commemoration to Queen Elizabeth's 1952 ascension to the throne over England and the entire United Kingdom.

Since we Americans don't have royalty, we tend to look to the British for our understanding of monarchy. And since Queen Elizabeth II has held her high office since her father died 67 years ago, many of us younger ones have never witnessed an ascension to that throne. Having observed several royal weddings, however, we can quickly imagine that there would be a lot of pomp and circumstance of both a civic and religious nature. Even the current chaos of Brexit wouldn't stop the Brits from going all out if Elizabeth were to retire or die, and her firstborn child Charles, Prince of Wales, were to ascend to the throne.

Ascension. That's what we're talking about today. Not the British royal family kind, but the King of kings and Lord of lords Jesus kind. For several weeks, we've been progressing through *The Apostles' Creed* from God the Father to Jesus the Son and from Jesus' suffering and death to his resurrection. And now, as we come to the lines, "he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father

Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead," I invite you to consider what it means for us to say, "I believe Jesus ascended."

1—JESUS IS ALIVE WITH POWER

Maybe the first meaning of Jesus' ascension is that Jesus is alive with power. This is a reinforcement of the previous statement that Jesus rose from the dead. On Easter morning, the women had discovered the empty tomb. Almost immediately, then, Jesus began appearing to the disciples in various places and forms. Acts 1:3 says that Jesus appeared to them over a period of 40 days, in which he spoke to them about the kingdom of God. That was an important time for the disciples, in which they could be convinced and assured that Jesus was still alive among them, working for God's kingdom.

But then, according to Acts 1:9, Jesus was suddenly lifted up and taken out of their sight, into a cloud where they couldn't see him anymore. That loss could have brought on a period of severe doubt for the disciples. Why was Jesus hidden from them? They could have feared that Jesus was now really gone, that the resurrection appearances had been a fluke or simply a delay in their grieving, and that this time he was really, really dead—or, at the very least, removed from them forever.

That definitely sounds like a dark cloud of trouble to us, but biblical people often described God as acting powerfully from the sky. In the Old Testament story of Moses freeing the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, God led the people with a pillar of lightning fire by night and a cloud by day. Later, God supposedly snatched up the prophet Elijah to heaven in a chariot of fire. At Jesus' baptism, heaven was opened and God's spirit and voice descended on Jesus like a dove. At the Transfiguration—when Jesus was up on top of a mountain with Peter, James, and John—God again beamed bright heavenly light upon Jesus. In Acts 2, wind and fire from heaven came upon the disciples with the Spirit of power. And later in Acts, it was a flash of lightning and the accompanying sound of Jesus' heavenly voice that led to the Apostle Paul's conversion and missionary work. Over and over again in the Bible, clouds and their companion lightning and thunder storms convey God's powerful presence and activity in the world. So, when Acts 1 tells us

that Jesus went up into a cloud, there is no hiddenness intended. Quite the contrary. This is a biblical way of saying that Jesus was alive with power.

2—JESUS IS DIVINE

Whether we're talking about the disciples described in Acts chapter one or our own selves 2000 years later, our affirmation that Jesus ascended also conveys the belief that Jesus is divine. When the author of Acts wrote that the disciples perceived Jesus being "taken up as they were watching," the metaphorical meaning was that Jesus was taken to the place where God is—because the human teacher and healer Jesus was, in fact, one with God.

In ancient biblical times, people had a very different understanding of the cosmos than we do today. Do you remember that, before Copernicus and Columbus, people believed that the sun revolved around a flat earth? Well, in biblical times, people had an even more primitive understanding of the world. They believed in what is called a three-tiered universe, kind of like a sandwich with the earth as the filling in the middle. Underneath the earth was Sheol, the place where the dead resided. Above the earth was heaven, the place where God lived. To people of biblical times, heaven was a spatial location above the clouds, sun, and stars. And if that's where God lived, then, of course, Jesus had to be taken up. Up is where Jesus would go because Jesus had to be with God because Jesus was God.

In reading about the Ascension, I came across an article that asked the question, What is "the Old Testament verse most quoted or alluded to in the New Testament"? According to one New Testament scholar at least, the answer is Psalm 110:1. Twenty-three times, New Testament writers quote or allude to the verse: "The Lord says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." Apparently, this belief that Jesus ascended to sit "at the right hand of God the Father Almighty" was a crucial idea in early Christian faith.¹ With an implicit bias toward right-handedness showing through here, the idea is simply that no one ever had been or ever would be closer to God than Jesus. As Philippians 2 tells us, after Jesus humbled himself as a human being and died on the cross, God

"highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend . . . and every tongue . . . confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." The ascension of Jesus signaled the reunion of God the Father and God the Son and made it clear that Jesus is divine.

3—JESUS IS VINDICATED

A third meaning of the Ascension is that Jesus is vindicated. One author writes that Jesus' ascension points to the truth "that justice cannot be permanently repressed."² No matter what happens, justice will prevail. In other words, to affirm that Jesus ascended to heaven, sits enthroned at the right hand of God, and shall judge the living and the dead, is to say that the tables have been turned. Those people, priests, and politicians who sat in judgment over Jesus are now being judged by him. Those who deemed Jesus blasphemous before God are now seeing that Jesus was, in fact, God. Those who unjustly crucified him on a criminal's cross are now seeing him exalted as Lord. The Ascension shows us that what was temporarily done wrong by limited human beings has been righted forever by our eternal God.

At the beginning of this sermon I made reference to royal weddings. When Prince William married Kate Middleton in 2011, we, the curious public, were given a lot of information about that young woman. One article at the time told how, as a 13-year-old, middle-class girl, Kate "was badly bullied" at "an elite girls' boarding school," where her aristocratic female classmates didn't think she was up to their social standards. So her parents moved her to "an equally grand," but this time co-ed school where, now, the boys publicly and cruelly ranked her appearance with only ones and twos on their scale of ten. The author of the article then wrote, tongue in cheek, "that, in due course, Queen Catherine will have the miserable [scoundrels] beheaded."³

That would be a "sweet victory,"⁴ alright, but probably not appropriate behavior for a 21st-century British queen. Jesus' kind of justice probably isn't focused on retribution and punishment either. Jesus' interest is in motivating us by his earthly example of loving fully, acting with great compassion, and speaking truth to power—even though that led to his own suffering and death. Jesus' resurrection and

ascension show us that, if we are faithful to God's call upon our lives, everything will work out in the end, even better than we could ever imagine. Given time, justice will prevail. Jesus is vindicated.

CONCLUSION

I think one of the problems of the Ascension for us today is all the pictures that we've seen. Even as those great works of art and the verbal descriptions behind them signal an amazing spiritual truth and reality, those human attempts to describe the indescribable also leave us wanting. Let me assure you that, when we say, "I believe Jesus ascended," we aren't required to believe that Jesus' body was sucked up or beamed up or even flown up into the sky. In the Bible, the words *up* and *down* are merely limited and fallible human ways of speaking about spiritual matters. This isn't so different from the way we Americans describe Australia as "the land down under"—as if we have some right to claim that we are on the top of the world.

Maybe a better way to think of ascension is to relate it to times in our own lives when we have felt especially close to God or especially alive spiritually—when we felt like we were at the top of our game in our Christian faith or on top of the world spiritually. Sure, it's also important for us to have times when we get *down* to work, when we humbly *lower* ourselves, and when we think and feel *deeply* about important matters. Jesus did that when he lived, suffered, and died as a human being among us. But then the days came for resurrection and exaltation. The King of kings and Lord of lords ascended his throne and took his place at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

Jesus is alive with power. Jesus is divine. And Jesus is vindicated. These are what we mean when we confess the words of the creed, "I believe . . . Jesus ascended."

¹Stephen Seamands, "He Ascended into Heaven," *Good News* (May-June 2011), p. 11. He is referring to NT scholar D.M. Hay.

²David Steindl-Rast, *Deeper than Words: Living the Apostles' Creed* (Doubleday Religion: New York, 2010), p. 128.

³Allison Pearson, "Citizen Kate," *Newsweek* (April 11, 2011), p. 36.

⁴"Sweet Victory" is the name of a song that SpongeBob SquarePants sings in a Super Bubble cartoon episode that may be used in the Feb. 3, 2019, Super Bowl half-time show. Songwriters: David Glen Eisley and Bob Kulick. "The winner takes all; it's the thrill of one more kill . . . "