

Ascension Day Sermon
May 5, 2016
Mark 16:9-20
Acts 1:1-11
Christ Ascends to the Right Hand of Power
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In the year 1529 Martin Luther among several other Lutheran theologians met with a group of Reformed theologians in Marburg, Germany to discuss the teaching of the Lord's Supper. Luther and all those on his side held that Christ's true body and blood are present with the bread and wine in the Supper. The Reformed theologians declared this impossible. Ulrich Zwingli, the leading Reformer of the Swiss declared, "The body of Christ is in one place, nor can it be in many places." And "Since the body of Christ is finite, it must therefore be in a certain place."

Here Zwingli brought to light what really was and still is the center of the issue. Who is Jesus Christ? That's the issue. It's not that Jesus' words are ambiguous. The grammar is not unclear. "This is my body. This is my blood." Are the least obscure passages in all of Scripture! Rather, the issue is whether this is possible according to the Person of Christ.

You see, Zwingli believed that Jesus' body and blood are finite, meaning, they take up a limited place. Like our bodies, which are bound to space and time, Christ's body, he concluded, must also be bound by the same limitations. For this reason, Christ's body could not be present on the Altar. So if it is not there, where is it? Well, at the right hand of God of course, as Scripture clearly teaches! Thus, with this interpretation Zwingli turned Ascension Day into a somber day. It is the day Christ departs far from us. He is as far from us as the heavens are from the earth. We now have a picture of Jesus stuck up in heaven on a throne, incapable of leaving. His throne of Majesty seems like a prison, which limits his travel. Of course, this is not true. Jesus' Ascension is a glorious day of victory! It is a time of rejoicing. But to understand this, we must understand the Person of Jesus Christ.

Yes, Jesus Christ is a true human being. His body takes up particular space in a particular time. He dwelt in the womb of the Virgin Mary for nine months. He roamed from village to village preaching the

Gospel. He was crucified on a mountain in Israel, which can still be located today. And his body occupied a tomb for three days.

Yet, Jesus is also true God. The Person of Christ is eternal. There has never been a time when he was not. Christ, the Son of God is equal to God the Father in majesty and power. He is co-eternal with the Father. Yet, for us men and for our salvation He became flesh. That is, Christ, true God, assumed our human nature. He is no longer only God. He is both God and man. The human and the divine nature are inseparably joined in the Person of Christ Jesus. Everything he does he does as both God and man. His divinity is not limited by his humanity and his humanity is not altered by his divinity. This is a great mystery to which angels look in wonder.

According to Zwingli's teaching, Jesus is only a man in a certain place at a time. Yet God can be present at many places at one time. This means that there are places and times when God is not man. But when we confess that God was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, we confess that Christ is always God and man. He is not sometimes God and sometimes a man. Really, the error that Zwingli fell into was the teaching of two Jesuses. One who is a man. And one who is God. But there is only one Jesus, one Christ, one Lord, who is both God and man.

Although this is impossible to rationalize how a man can be God, yet remain a man and how God can be a man, yet remain God. But we believe it because of the clear witness of Scripture. Jesus is God. St. John writes, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." (John 1:1) and St. Paul writes to the Romans, "Christ is God over all." (Romans 9:5) Jesus is also a man. He was born of the Virgin Mary. St. Paul writes, "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5) According to his human nature he was born, ate and drank, sweat, and grew tired. He suffered and died. God cannot according to his divinity be born, eat and drink, grow tired, suffer or die. According to his divine nature Christ is all powerful, all knowing, and eternal. A man cannot according to his human nature be all powerful, all knowing, and eternal. Yet we don't speak of Christ as sometimes God and sometimes a man. When Christ by his divine power walked on water, we do not say God walked on water, while the man Jesus stayed on shore. When Jesus forgave sins, something

only God can do, he declared, "The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." After his resurrection, the doors were locked for fear of the Jews, yet Jesus Christ appeared to his disciples, not as a ghost, but as a man with pierced hands and feet, who ate in front of them. A man cannot pass through walls, and yet Christ Jesus did.

Everything Christ does, whether according to his divine nature or his human nature, he does as the one Christ Jesus. He cannot be divided. This means that when the baby Jesus dwelt in the womb of Mary and was born of her, God was born. The God who is incapable of suffering and dying did suffer and die in the person of Jesus Christ, making full satisfaction for our sins. If it were only the man Jesus who died, his death would not be a sufficient price for our sins. But because of the communication of the humanity with the divinity in Christ, his death was the death of God, a price that no sin can overturn.

Christ's human and divine nature are inseparably joined in the person of Christ. For this reason St. Paul writes, "None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." (1 Corinthians 2:8) And St. Peter declares to the Jews, "and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead." (Acts 3:15) Certainly the Lord of glory cannot be crucified nor can the Author of life be killed, yet because the Lord of glory and Author of life is true man, that is exactly what happened. We cannot separate his divinity from his humanity.

Jesus himself says, "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (John 3:13) Certainly, Christ was not a man in heaven before his incarnation in the Virgin's womb. Yet, the Son of Man is the Son of God. We cannot speak of one and exclude the other. So it is clear from Scripture that where Jesus is a man, he is also God. And where he is God, he is also a man. He cannot be divided. Likewise, his divinity cannot be limited by his humanity nor can his humanity be removed because of his divinity.

And what does that mean for us? It means that Christ can, because he is God, be present in his human body and blood on this altar tonight. Just as his human nature did not deter him from passing through the walls to appear to his disciples after his resurrection, his human nature does not deter him from joining us tonight in his real body and blood.

This means that we can celebrate Christ's Ascension. When Jesus ascended to the right hand of God the Father Almighty, he did not simply travel a far distance away, separating us from his body. He ascended, as Scripture states, to the right hand of power! (Matt. 26:64; Mark 16:62; Luke 22:69; 1 Peter 3:22) Jesus' ascension is his victory! It is his coronation where all powers are put under his feet. This what King David prophesied of in Psalm 110, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." Jesus doesn't simply sit on a throne, he rules from the throne of Majesty (Hebrews 1:3; 8:1). God the Father exalted Christ Jesus to such a high position, because 1. He is the eternal Son of God. And 2. He defeated sin, death, and the power of hell through his death and resurrection. All things are subject to him, as St. Peter writes, "Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him." (1 Peter 3:22)

Hell is subject to Christ. If it weren't, he would not be exalted to the Father's right hand. Sin is subject to him. If Christ's divine blood did not wash away every speck of sin, he could not be called its Lord. Satan and all his hordes are subject to Christ, because they cannot accuse the saints washed clean in Christ's blood. The right hand of God the Father is not a local place where you can travel with enough money and time. It is the powerful office, which God reserved for Jesus from eternity. And from this office, Christ showers us with his gifts.

St. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (Eph. 4:8) Christ Jesus, in his high office showers down gifts to his church. The apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. He gave us the Office of the Ministry to proclaim the gospel, to baptize, to forgive sinners, and to give his body and blood to the hungry and thirsty faithful.

Christ's Ascension is of great advantage to you. It by no means limits Christ's ability to help you. In fact, Christ at the Father's right hand intercedes for you (Romans 8:34). And it is by that right hand of power that he helps you even today. St. Peter speaks in Acts 2 after the Holy Spirit rushed on the disciples causing them to proclaim the Gospel in many languages, "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you

yourselves are seeing and hearing." From the Father's right hand Christ sent his Holy Spirit then and so he does today. He sends his Holy Spirit in Baptism. He himself forgives those who hear the absolution from the pastor. And our Lord at the right hand of power also has the ability to be on this altar in his body and blood. His Ascension does not put this in doubt, rather it secures this promise.

So let us celebrate the victory of Christ's Ascension and receive his body and blood delivered to us from the right hand of the Father and so prepare our hearts for Christ's glorious return where we too will ascend to be with him forever and ever. Amen.