



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Ascension Day (B)**

#### **Sursum Corda**

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

“Ascension” is one of those many “church words” that may not have much, if any meaning, to those outside the church. In fact, the ascension of Christ and Ascension Day itself may seem like an obscure event or day even to church members. Portrayals of the ascension in art can appear awkward, or even conflicting, with Jesus being carried by angels in early portrayals while in others he appears to be ascending on his own power into the clouds as though he could fly. In the Middle Ages in Europe, Ascension Day was sometimes commemorated with visual and dramatic practices that included processions to the Mount of Olives, with hikes up local hills and mountains, or in some places with the raising up of a crucifix or a statue of the risen Christ that was carried right through the roof of the church. This may sound odd and distant to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and we may wonder what theological purpose or point this holy day or this event has for us today.

The word “ascent” or “ascension” does, at least, have a straightforward meaning. It simply means to move upward, to rise, or to be lifted up. It is often used to describe those rising in rank or in position or even to describe the act of an airplane as it rises into the sky. In this case, the “ascension” refers to Jesus’ ascent as he was lifted up into the heavens at the end of his earthly ministry in the midst of his followers. This event was commonly assumed to have occurred upon the Mount of Olives 40 days following Jesus’ resurrection after he had made many appearances to his followers. Lest we downplay the Ascension as an event, it should be noted that the Ascension is one of the few affirmations we make about Jesus’ life in our ancient creeds. In the Nicene Creed, we proclaim that Jesus, “ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” The Ascension has also been observed universally by Christians since at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century and it ushers the Church into a liturgical period known as “Ascensiontide” that lasts until Pentecost Sunday, when the Church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit.

One of the beautiful things about the liturgical year with holy days and liturgical forms of worship, is that if one pays attention to the appointed prayers and lessons throughout the church year, one can learn and experience all the central teachings of the Christian faith. For instance, the liturgy of the Eucharistic prayer opens with a dialogue that begins with the words, “The Lord be with you... And also with you.” This dialogue begins what is known by its Latin name, the “sursum corda” which translates directly to, “Lift up your hearts,” because the prayer continues with the invitation to those gathered to “Lift up [their] hearts.”

Clergy are taught in seminary to physically lift their arms and hands upward during this prayer in the ancient prayer position called “orans,” in order to convey tangibly and physically this sense of lifting up in a posture of supplication. The people then respond, “We lift them up to the Lord.” The *sursum corda* ends with giving thanks to God and the prayer then moves into retelling salvation history with worship and thanksgiving to God until the invitation to receive Communion.

The goal of this portion of the ancient liturgy is to participate in, essentially, an ascension of the heart, by intentionally and prayerfully lifting up our hearts to God in faith, love, and joy. From a spiritual and emotional standpoint, this is a moment to pause and bring our awareness into God’s presence. In that sense, we are called to ascend to God, just as Jesus ascended to God, by lifting up our hearts, our souls, and our deepest selves to God. In this way, our prayer reminds us that the Eucharist is not *just* about the fact that Jesus descended to the earth to come to us, nor did Jesus merely ascend into heaven, but that he ascended in order to draw us all to God because we too are called to ascend in heart, body, and mind to the Lord. In Christ, by faith through grace, we learn that ascension is a joint effort! In fact, not only is the Eucharistic celebration a joint effort of both descension and ascension, but our entire spiritual journey is a joint effort that involves God coming to us and our responding and coming to God, descending and ascending together, with God working in us and us working with God. In this way, heaven and earth are joined together for the work of God’s Kingdom.

When we follow Jesus and experience true ascension, there is a clear and gracious result. Luke’s Gospel account illustrates that result in our reading. Following Christ’s ascension, the text reveals that the disciples experienced three things: “worship,” “great joy,” and “blessing.” This is the same pattern of the Eucharistic prayer, and this is the pattern of the spiritual life. When we ascend and lift up our hearts to God, we too are filled with God’s life-giving, praise, worship, blessing, and joy!

Of course, we are called to ascend and lift our hearts to God not only on Sunday mornings or during the Eucharistic prayer, but continually and throughout our days. If we want to experience more joy in life, as well as praise and blessing, then we can lift up our hearts to God constantly in moments of ascension.

Think how our perspective might change if we ascended frequently by momentarily lifting up our hearts to God in the midst of life’s challenges. Finding yourself aggravated by someone or something? Pause and lift up your heart to God! On the verge of losing your temper? Pause and lift up your heart to God! Has someone said something hurtful? Pause and lift up your heart to God! Have you just been cut off in traffic? Pause and lift up your heart to God! Are you worried or anxious about something? Pause and lift up your heart to God! Ascension can be done anytime and anywhere. And while this is certainly not a cure-all, it is quite difficult to remain in anger or worry long when we ascend and find our hearts with God in the joy of ascension.

These little, daily momentary ascensions can change our lives over time, because in those instances we are, by grace, rising above our current situation and being lifted into God’s presence and awareness. Far from

being an obscure event, ascension can be a most practical reminder of how we might live out and practice our faith regularly, knowing that God has come to us and we have been called to come to God. So today and every day: Lift up your hearts!

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