

“LORD OF ALL!”
Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53
Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

When I was growing up, we had a richly illustrated children’s Bible story book on our coffee table that we read from every night. With my sister on one side and me on the other, my mom would take this huge volume, open it at the bookmark where we had stopped the night before, and read us our bedtime story. Although she read with great enthusiasm and varied the inflection of her voice quite a bit as she read, it was the pictures that captivated my interest. I remember to this day the illustration of young Daniel in the lion’s den, surrounded by ferocious beasts. God kept them from harming Daniel. In fact, one illustration showed Daniel reaching out, petting one of the lions! I remember the story of Adam and Eve. My sister and I would giggle a little when my mom read that they were both naked. Sure enough, the illustration had Adam and Eve standing there with no clothes on, but with branches of trees and plants in strategic places. I remember the story of wicked Queen Jezebel and the mean look in her eye as she gave Elijah a hard time. One could tell just by looking at her that she was an evil person!

The stories of Jesus especially fascinated my sister and me. I remember the illustration of Jesus in the carpenter’s shop, working alongside Joseph. There was the scene of Jesus teaching the people, using a fishing boat as his pulpit. No scene was more moving than the depiction of the three crosses on Calvary’s hill; no scene more beautiful than the angels at the garden tomb telling the women the good news: *“He is not here. He has risen as he said.”* (Matt. 28:6)

One of the most spectacular pictures in the book was the Ascension of Jesus. There stood the disciples on a hill looking up at Jesus, his arms outstretched showing his hands and his feet still scarred from that terrible suffering, his white robe billowing in the breeze, moving up into the clouds. Jesus’ hands were raised to bless the disciples and to send them on their mission — to spread the good news of salvation to all people everywhere. As my mother continued the story, in its much abridged version from the original Greek text, she related how Jesus disappeared from sight. The disciples stood there in a daze, not sure what to make of it all. Then two angels made it clear. The disciples were to return to Jerusalem and continue the work that Jesus started: preaching and teaching about the Kingdom of God, and healing those who were sick in body, mind and spirit. It wasn’t hard for me to believe in those days. My mom read the story in an extremely convincing way (she taught Adult Sunday school for years); the pictures made it clear.

Now my guess is that most of you, as you got up this morning and got ready for church, did not give much thought to the fact that today is Ascension Sunday. This day on the Christian calendar may not mean a whole lot to you. The idea of Jesus with outstretched arms, ascending

into the sky may make little sense. In fact, to those scientific minds among us, the ascension of Jesus may be more than problematic; it may be a real stumbling block to faith. To be sure, we have seen Hollywood do stunts like this, but when was the last time you saw someone ascend into heaven in real life?

The cynical among us would explain that if Jesus rose from the dead, there had to be a way of getting him off the scene, and so the church, in good *DaVinci Code* fashion, introduced the doctrine of the Ascension of Jesus. They will tell you its kind of like a television series where one of the main actors does not want to do the show anymore, so in the season finale, the script has him die. Jesus rose from the dead, but he is not here with us today in bodily form. Reason? *He ascended into heaven.*

Those who want to argue the logistics and scientific facts surrounding the ascension are missing the point. Please hear me today when I say that the ascension of Jesus is primarily not about Jesus' vertical movement into space; it's about Jesus' changed condition and status vis a vis the disciples and all of us who live in a space-time world. Jesus' ascension is a transformation from a confined human existence to a full union with God. Artists have most often depicted the ascension of Jesus as a kind of elevation — somewhat like a rocket ship or a hot-air balloon lifting off the earth and up into the sky. A better analogy might be those children's toys called "transformers," where an innocent-looking car or truck is completely changed into a powerful hero, a force to be reckoned with.

Following the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus was with the disciples, but in a different way than when he walked the earth with them, spent time in their fishing boats, and at their dinner tables. The disciples had to wrestle with what it meant to not have Jesus with them in bodily form. After we have lived with someone, we have to get used to what it means not to have them with us anymore. Those graduating from high school are eagerly looking forward to going away to college. It will be different, both for those who are going away and for those who are still at home. How hard it is to say "goodby" when someone we love moves away. Oh, we promise to write, to call, to e-mail. But it's never quite the same. How hard it is, how painful it is to say goodbye in the sick room. The Bible says that the disciples watched Jesus disappear from their sight. I know what it is like to watch a loved one disappear from sight, and many of you do, too. I have been in hospital and hospice rooms where we were literally separated from those that we love.

As Christians we believe that these separations are not permanent, and that death is not the end of our existence. Our Epistle lesson talks about the hope that we have which is great power for us who believe. You see, Christian theology claims that in Jesus, God entered human life. That means that God entered life and death in order to communicate the presence of divinity to every moment of living and dying. Incarnation implies that "*the world is charged with the grandeur of God,*" to quote Jesuit poet Gerard Manly Hopkins.(1) As Christians, we believe that the whole universe is a sacrament of God's presence. Thus, when our loved ones leave this earth, they do not leave the presence of God. Just the opposite — they are drawn closer to God. Our loss is not permanent, for we will eventually join them in the presence of the Almighty. This is the hope that the Apostle Paul speaks about in Ephesians. It is, as he says, "*Great power for us who believe.*" The Incarnation, God's becoming one of us, part of us, not only gives us hope when we are separated from those we love and when we come to the point of our own death, it also changes the picture for our lives today.

Nobody in the New Testament stayed the same after they met Jesus. Some accepted him; some rejected him; but nobody could ignore him. This morning he is confronting us, too, and **we will have to decide what to do with Jesus, too.** It is clear what the early church thought of him. Here these words from Ephesians, “*Christ is...far above all rulers and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given... God has placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*” (1:21-23) Those who have studied the Bible, those who have read church history, know that Christians have not always walked the walk, even when the talk sounded convincing. There have been many moments in history, to say nothing of people’s individual lives, when Christ has not been placed above all other authority. Many of our problems today stem from the fact that throughout Christian history the church has failed to keep the main thing the main thing.

On this Ascension Sunday, this text is given to us as a blueprint for how to live a victorious Christian life. I would like to mention four areas where this ancient text has relevance for today.

First, if Christ is Lord of all, **we need to treat God’s world with reverence and respect.** Many times when we read the *Social Principles of the United Methodist Church* in our new member classes, people express surprise that the church is involved and concerned about the environment. Shouldn’t we be sticking to spiritual things, some ask? Well, the environment is a spiritual thing. This is God’s world. The resources that God has given us are not ours to do with as we please, but to use wisely as stewards. We are not the owners of planet earth. God is. If we believe that Christ has dominion over all things, it will affect our attitudes toward our world and its resources as well.

Second, if Jesus is Lord of all, **it will affect the way we relate to power.** Our Confirmation class learned the Apostles’ Creed as part of their preparation to join the church. It is three paragraphs long — one paragraph dedicated to each of the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some of the youth had a more difficult time learning the Creed than others. But do you know? The earliest creed was only three words long. The youngest of our children in Sunday school could learn it easily. The Creed is simply this: **Jesus is Lord.** That seems easy enough to learn. Is it easy to practice? Not by any means! In the days of the Roman empire, the people were expected to say, “Caesar is Lord.” Caesar was seen as having almost divine power as the ruler. To say, “Jesus is Lord,” was a subversive activity. To say “Jesus is Lord” meant that Caesar was not Lord. It was a crime to say that, a crime punishable by death. No one in our congregation or our listening audience this morning will get put to death for saying “Jesus is Lord.” Yet I believe that saying “Jesus is Lord,” and living out that belief is sometimes a subversive activity, even today.

If Jesus is Lord of all, then **he is the head of the church.** That sounds like so much common sense. We all know that Jesus is the head of the church. But is he really? Do we seek God’s will in all our decision-making in the church or does politics get in the way? You will have to answer that question, and so will I.

Finally, if Jesus is Lord of all, then **he is the Lord of your life and of mine.** That’s where it gets more difficult. You see, I can point an accusing finger at the government, and at the appalling greed of the captains of business and industry. I can make a pretty good case for the corruption and the hypocrisy of the church in our day. But when it comes to my life — well,

now we've quit preaching and started meddling, haven't we?

When we lived in Youngstown, we had wonderful neighbors who lived across the street. They no doubt observed what went on at our house; we certainly noticed what went on at theirs! Every Saturday morning, the garage door would go up, and my neighbor would back his shiny, black Corvette into the driveway and proceed to wash it from top to bottom. Now this wasn't just hosing off the dust and dirt that had gotten on it during the week. This was a three hour process. Every chrome spoke of every wheel was polished, the whole bit. As a person who only washes my car once every few months, whether it needs it or not, I was totally intrigued by this activity. I was amazed at the dedication my neighbor, who got down on his knees every Saturday morning, to worship that car.

Now as I remember my neighbor's behavior, I also need to ask myself who and what I worship. What are my priorities? I have wrestled with that question, and I'm not too pleased with some of my answers.

Who or what do you worship? Is it your car? Is it your job? Is it your families? Is it your hobbies or your leisure time pursuits? Where is Jesus on the spectrum? He is supposed to be at the top of the list. He is supposed to be number one. That's what Ascension Day is all about. He is supposed to be "**Lord of all.**"

Prayer: On this Ascension Sunday, help us to reflect upon the place where we put you in our lives, O Lord. May we truly crown you Lord of all this day. Amen.

Note:

1. Hopkins, Gerard Manley. Quoted in *The Christian Century*. Vol. 126. No. 10., p. 18.