

The Fullness of Christ©

Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

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Rev. Sharlyn Gates

You have probably heard the phrase “all good things must come to an end.” We so often lament over ending of the things we enjoy. A visit with family. A job we loved. A trip we took.

Today, we see a good thing coming to an end as we turn our focus on the celebration of the ascension of Jesus - that time when Jesus is taken up to be with God.

For seven weeks we have been celebrating the Easter Season. We have sung the resurrection alleluias and especially focused on the Easter message – that death is not the end. God raised Jesus from death to life and we have that promise as well.

We have read about appearances of Jesus after his resurrection. In fact, just before this reading, Luke tells us that Jesus appeared to his friends in the upper room where they were hiding and he asked them if they had something to eat.

Here was a risen from the dead being eating fish, showing them he was flesh, he wasn't that different than he had been before. Showing that he was not a ghost, but he was real.

But today, as we focus on Jesus ascending to the Father, we look at what it signifies: An ending. Yes, all things must come to an end. But it also marks a beginning. Things might end but new things are always around the corner. As Paul says in Romans 8, “God works all things for good ...”

Just as Jesus does with the two on the road to Emmaus, that Sunday evening after the crucifixion, when Jesus shows them he is alive, Jesus then appears to all the disciples and begins teaching them, reminding them of all that the Old Testament taught.

He pointed out what Moses taught and what all the prophets proclaimed about the coming Messiah. He showed them how it has now all been fulfilled in him ... in his birth, his life, his death and resurrection. It is finished. He has completed what the prophets and the psalms said would happen, what they professed the Messiah would accomplish.

And then Jesus leads them to Bethany, where they began the journey to Jerusalem and to Jesus final hours, just a week before. And it is there, that Jesus is taken up as he is blessing the disciples.

The ascension of Jesus signifies the end of something important. It is the completion of the prophecies of the Old Testament. It is the end of the incarnation – of God becoming human and living on earth.

It is the end of Jesus' presence as they know it. He has taught. He has modeled life in God. He has done all he can do as the human Messiah. And now we see him as the risen Christ, ascending to the Father ... wherever that may be.

The ascension indicates an ending; a completion. A finality. It is the glorious finale of the one sent from God. It is a celebration of the work of Christ, of salvation won, of victory over death and of Jesus rising to be with God forever.

And yet, the ascension also marks a beginning, for there is yet another chapter to this fullness of Christ.

How is that so? Jesus is done. All victory is won. Salvation is given in Christ. What more can there be?

Well, it seems evident there is much more. There has been much more for 2000 years, really. And if you take a look around, you will see what it is.

The fullness of Christ depends on you, on us. Jesus did not just go and say, "It's over now. There's nothing left to do."

No. We are told in several places that Jesus commanded the disciples to go out and to preach repentance and forgiveness. Jesus especially wanted them to proclaim to all nations the love and mercy of God.

Luke, in the book of Acts, goes on to tell the story of the how the Church was born. He tells about the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples with power and how, like wildfire, the good news spread from nation to nation.

Matthew's gospel ends with Jesus commissioning the disciples telling them to go and baptize in his name and to make disciples of all nations. In other words, Jesus intended that the Church would be formed and would continue the ministry he began, with the power of the Holy Spirit that would soon come upon them.

So, Jesus' ascension marked the end of his life on earth – his physical presence. Just as we need closure when a loved one dies, so did the disciples. How unsettling it would have been for Jesus to keep making appearances to them, but finally, the appearances become fewer and fewer until they happen no more. Their grief and confusion might never have ended.

But because they were able to be present, witnessing this great, divine mystery, Luke tells us they went to Jerusalem with great joy and they praised God in the temple, waiting for the promised Holy Spirit to direct them and empower them.

Notice how this faith story – this Christian story – ends in the temple. It's actually where it began too with the announcement to the old priest, Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth that they would have a son in their old age and he would prepare the way for the Messiah. John the Baptist was that son, of course.

But to begin Jesus' story and to end it as well in the Jerusalem temple, the place where faith was so important – where all the sacred Hebrew Scriptures were read and taught – points to how connected the faith of the Jewish ancestors is to the believers of Jesus as well.

We should never separate ourselves from those important roots. Without the Old Testament, the New Testament would be diminished. It would not be complete.

In the Old and New Testaments, we have the story of God's amazing work throughout history. We have the writings of the Hebrew people telling of their faith in God as creator; we read the stories of all those who were in relationship with Yahweh, with the God who called and led them, and used them in mighty ways, regardless of how human and frail they were – or even how sinful they were at times.

And, in Jesus, we have the completed plan that was from the beginning; a plan for God to be made known to God's children through Jesus, the Son. We have learned and experienced the mercy of God, the forgiveness, the life that is new and abundant, and we have come to have the great hope of life eternal that is promised in the Easter message of resurrection.

Yet, all of this and even in the closure that came with Jesus' ascension, is not the complete story.

We heard Paul's words a little while ago, written to the church in Ephesus. His prayer was that we – who are believers – might have our eyes opened, our hearts enlightened that we might know the hope that he has called us to in this Christian faith and the riches that we inherit from the saints before us.

Paul says that the power of God raised Jesus from the dead and that he seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms. He writes that God placed all things under the feet of Jesus, the Lord, and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, - and hear this – the FULLNESS of him who fills everything in every way.

We, the Church have become the *fullness of Christ*. The story is not complete without both the Old Testament and the Gospels, but it is also not complete without us; without the Church!

Think about it. For over 2000 years, the Church has been doing the work of Christ – proclaiming the good news of God’s amazing love and forgiveness; proclaiming the resurrection story of new life and life eternal. The Church has become like a relay, in a way, to tag team with the temple and take the message of faith even fuller and further.

The Church has been about the mission and ministry of Christ Jesus – healing, caring for the poor, standing up for the oppressed, providing a welcome loving place of worship for all who come, reaching out and courageously going out to all the ends of the earth to spread the good news.

The Church has not been perfect, just like all those in the Scriptures who made mistakes, who failed at times. Yet God, in his mercy and love and with the power of the Holy Spirit, raised us up and set us back on the right road so God could use us.

This is our calling. All who have felt the pull to be a part of the Church are called and equipped to be of service in Christ’s name.

So, the ascension was the end of a story that accumulated over many, many years. And it was a closure of a precious time when the Messiah walked on earth – Immanuel – God in the flesh.

But just like so many things in life that end or change – it is also a beginning ... the start of something great and beautiful that God has planned all along.

We are a part of that plan. We are participating in the fullness of Christ. Let us be full of joy and praise to God for including us in this amazing plan of salvation and ministry. And may we see how important it is to pass on this calling of God – to be the Church – the Fullness of Christ.

All glory and majesty are God’s forever and ever! Amen.

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