



**St. Philip Anglican Church**

A Spacious Place of Welcome

Sermon transcript

St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist, 21 May 2023, Ascension Sunday

Rev Allen Doerksen

Sermon begins 431:48

<https://youtu.be/kOeL-AK0I1c?t=1911>

Well, this past Thursday, several of the most secular countries in the world,, really in Europe, countries like Germany, France, the Netherlands and Finland, among others, celebrated a national holiday. Maybe more surprisingly, so did the largest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia. The most secular countries in the world and the largest Muslim country don't usually agree on holidays, let alone a religious holiday. But they somehow managed to agree that Ascension Day, the day the resurrected Jesus disappeared, should be one of those, should be a holiday. Now the irony is, is that most Canadian Christians, most American Christians, haven't even heard of Ascension Day, let alone know what it's about or why. It's still celebrated in parts of the world, and it's not really my purpose today to go through all of that cultural history and baggage, but it is an interesting bit of research to think about why those countries would celebrate it.

If we grew up in the Christian faith, we may have thought that the Ascension, was an event that was basically an "exit stage right" sort of thing, like when a TV series loses one of its stars - you know, they've decided to make it big in the movies, and so they have to be written out of the series, usually there's a killing-off scene explaining what happened to the character. Now, thankfully, that's not what Ascension is, but it's the Church's version of writing the physical, albeit resurrected, Jesus out of the remaining episodes, and as a kind of necessary prelude to introducing the new character we'll meet next Sunday, the Holy Spirit, on Pentecost. Of course, we feel kind of badly about that, we are Christ-ians, right? So we've given Jesus a job. Well, he's gone. He's in heaven, getting it ready for us, when we die. That's a caricature, of course, but Saint Augustine said back in the 5th century, "this is the festival which confirms the grace of all the festivals together, without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished".

And how could he say that? Well, to know why, we have to understand a little bit about the imagery around the event.

No doubt if you've had the privilege of traveling to some of the great churches in the world, you've seen paintings of the Ascension, and inevitably they show Jesus being lifted up, riding on a cloud. Now that detail isn't in the last few verses from Luke that we just read this morning, but in the third reading assigned for today, which we skipped because, hey, we're Saint Philip and we skip things, or as things go, add things. The cloud imagery appears in the first 11 verses of the Acts of the Apostles. Now, if you think with me about the cloud and what it signifies, you'll realize that it's nothing to do with where you keep your documents, and it's not an "exit stage right" sort of thing.

So think back with me: Moses on the mountain, receiving the commandments. A cloud descends and shrouds Moses and the mountain. And what results? The gift of the law, the constitution of Israel, the foundation of which we take for granted in western civilization. Think of the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day, the sign that God's presence had drawn close, and would protect and provide for the people as they went on their circuitous journey through the wilderness. Think about when, finally having reached the Promised Land, the people gather around the newly dedicated temple, Solomon's temple, and a cloud of glory fills the place and everyone is filled with awe. Think about how in the prophet Daniel's greatest night vision, he sees someone called the Son of Man who comes with the clouds of heaven, and the Ancient of Days gives him an eternal Kingdom, made up of all the peoples and the nations and languages of the earth. And think about how at Jesus' Transfiguration, the voice from the cloud says, "This is my beloved son. Listen to him."

So to be in the cloud, biblically speaking, is the language of God's guiding, providing, awe-inspiring, calling, loving presence, drawing near to humanity. So when the resurrected Jesus ascends after 40 days of opening the disciples' minds to further understanding - I think Shannon did a great job explaining 40 as a kind of "the time is right, the time is fulfilled, it's finished" - 40 of course being the number not only for Noah's flood, but the number of days Moses spent in the cloud; 40 being the number of years Israel was directed and provided for by the pillar of cloud in the desert. So when all of this starts to come together, we realize we're in the presence of something momentous, something worth noting. Even if you didn't get last Thursday off.

And our suspicions are right. We're honing in on an answer to a great question: What was the death and resurrection of Jesus for? I mean, we Christians have

always believed that the death and resurrection saves humanity in some fundamental way. And the Ascension helps us to see in what way. It's not a way of writing the human Jesus out of the next season, out of the series altogether, so the new figure of the Holy Spirit can come on board. It is, rather, the resurrected human Jesus actually being written into not only the plot line thus far, but into every plot line that could be imagined. If saved humanity is now at the right hand of God, which means the place of authority, if Jesus and God are one in the cloud, so to speak, then your humanity and my humanity are also written into God's storyline.

So leave the metaphorical imagery aside and let's get to the heart of the matter. It is humanity taking her place at the centre of God's reign, so that the Spirit which will be given, and which we'll celebrate being given next week is God's spirit, but equally the spirit of the Human One (capitals). And so there's common cause, we could say, with a kind of deified humanism and Christianity – we'll go there, maybe in the next couple of weeks, we'll talk about that. This is why when our gospel reading calls us to witness to repentance, changing our minds and forgiveness, is actually the greatest of news. We're called to witness to this extraordinary achievement of the cross and resurrection. God at the heart of humanity: yes, that's important. It's something we saw that Paul was willing to learn and affirm in last week's speech in Athens, when he affirmed God's presence at the heart of all religions really. But now we learned that the Human One is at the heart of God, so that through repentance and forgiveness, humanity, each of us, and communities as a whole can take their place, our place, there as well.

And so repentance isn't a God, God lording over us, commanding us to obey a kind of "you better or else" phenomena. When I was trying to please God and failing, when I thought that religion was knowing about God at the best of times, Jesus came to me in my spirit, and my own brokenness, comes to us in our own brokenness, and convinces us that we are already beloved. That God wants us to draw close and be known by God, and have us know God, and that God's presence will help us all change our minds and do so even through the most difficult of circumstances. So when I think about what I share with people who are not sure about this Christian thing, that's what I share. I mean, 40 years of wilderness wandering is a kind of apt metaphor, isn't it, for even the best lived of human lives. Why wouldn't we want to do that with the risen and present Jesus, the human divine Jesus, who knows all our weaknesses, has experienced the effects of human evil, personally gone through death, and is now a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud for us whenever we need that provision.

And so you and I are called to be witnesses simply to that, to that kind of changing our minds. And we can live into that, not just with words like a preacher does week by week, but by being a supporting, helping presence to all who want to break free from all the human slaveries we continue to invent. We seem to be very good at that. OK, well, that sounds like something could wrap our minds around, pun intended.

But what about this forgiveness of sins, why do we have to be witnesses to that, or what does that even mean? Is that good news too? Isn't there enough guilt in the world? Shouldn't we just forget about our mistakes and not focus on them? Well, here's the beautiful thing about Christ's forgiveness: it's God affirming our change of mind. It's God's love given through human acknowledgement. It's all about giving us a more flourishing life. God asks us to be sorry only for those things that damage us. When we engage in behaviour that ignores or harms others, directly or indirectly, we know now that we're engaging in a kind of self-harm. So much of what we've come to learn about trauma, dysfunctional relationships, societal structures that drive a sense of alienation, could be changed if we would face our sins and accept forgiveness.

The world doesn't need those words, really. It needs to see a community that's willing to live them, in positive, life-affirming changes of mind joined to the grace that God pours out through forgiveness. As our first reading puts it, we are the body of Christ's ascended reality. We need to be enlightened. We need to see light in light, to know the riches we've been given, but we can take that on board, and when we do, or as we do, as Saint Augustine said, we will see in our own lives the confirmation of every festival. Now the Human One is writing each of us into the greatest story of all: God's. Amen.

[end: 46:47]