

**"The Ascension of Our Understanding"**  
**Sermon for Ascension Sunday**  
**Lectionary Year A**  
**June 5, 2011**  
**Texts: Ephesians 1:20-23; Luke 22:44-53**  
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Today is Ascension Sunday, when we focus on Jesus' return to heaven following his life, death, and resurrection. The passage for this morning from Luke's Gospel tells that story. But I want to talk about another kind of ascension in this sermon, not Jesus' ascension into heaven, but the ascension of our understanding that Jesus desires for each of us to experience. In every day usage of the word, to ascend means to move upward, to rise from a lower level to a higher one. Christ wants his followers to ascend in their faith, and that requires an ascension of their understanding of scripture.

You heard read not only the Gospel lesson for today but also a portion of the lectionary passage from Ephesians, a letter most likely written in the tradition of the Apostle Paul by a student of his or the "school" established by him. The passage paints a lofty picture of what happens to Jesus after he ascends to heaven, what it means for him to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. This is a description of what biblical scholars and theologians refer to as the "Cosmic

Christ," the Christ who is above all things. Everything that exists does so under Jesus' feet, as the text claims.

This passage of scripture represents an "ascension" of the understanding of the early church as to the nature and character of Christ. This ascension takes the church's christology to a whole new level. This is "over the top" stuff. This is not the itinerant rabbi walking the dusty roads of Palestine with his disciples following behind him. This is the Lord of the universe.

The passage from Luke brings us back down to earth. Jesus is still with his disciples and trying for the last time to explain to them who he really is so that they then can go out and witness to the world about him. Basically, he is reiterating for them the fact that he is the Messiah, the fulfillment of the promise of God. Why does he feel the need to do that?

Because it is so incredibly hard for even his closest followers to come to terms with the fact that the Messiah is one who suffers, dies, and is raised from the dead. For his disciples, that is a major stumbling block and a huge obstacle to overcome, because that is not their understanding of who the Messiah is, not what they have been taught and thus have come to expect. In order to accept the fact that the crucified Jesus is the Messiah, there has to be a major paradigm

shift in the thinking of the disciples. There can be no church unless and until this roadblock can be cleared.

So how does Jesus get them to see things as they really are, to make this paradigm shift in their thinking? How does he increase and expand and heighten their understanding? He does it by interpreting scripture, which of course at that time was only the Old Testament. He takes them back through the Bible and helps them to see what it had been saying all along about him that they had failed to recognize.

You see, they knew scripture. Jesus wasn't teaching them the Bible. Their problem was not one of *knowledge*; it was one of *understanding*. They didn't know what scripture meant, but through his interpretation, they were able to "see the light" and gain insight into God's will as revealed in the Bible. And they must have gotten the message, because there would have been no church if they hadn't, and there would not have wound up being a description of Christ like the one we find in Ephesians.

How did that happen? What did Jesus do to get them to see scripture in a bold and progressive new way? The text makes it very clear: *he opened their minds*. Scripture cannot be interpreted appropriately and responsibly without an open mind. It just can't. Why? T. B. Maston established the Department of Christian Social Ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1943. He

retired in 1963. During that twenty year period, Dr. Maston widely was considered the dean of Christian ethics for Southern Baptists. One of his most famous sayings throughout his illustrious and influential teaching and publishing career was this: "The Bible does not always mean what it says; it always means what it means."

In other words, the genuine meaning of scripture only can be understood when it is appropriately and responsibly interpreted. And in order for that to take place, there must be both an adequately trained interpreter of scripture and a group of people with minds that are open enough to receive and then act on scripture's genuine meaning. It is absolutely crucial that we understand that we have the same problem the disciples did. What kept them from understanding what scripture really meant keeps us from seeing the genuine meaning of the biblical message.

What is that problem? Lenses. Lenses. Everyone who reads scripture does so through a set of lenses, and every set of lenses allows us to see certain things and causes us to overlook other things the Bible has to say to us. Lenses are composed of certain factors that exist for all of us: age, ethnicity, culture, gender, income, sexual orientation, education, and faith tradition. These factors determine how we read the Bible and what we get out of it. The disciples needed to trade in their old lenses for new ones, and Jesus does that for

them. He opens their minds to see things in scripture they had never seen before. Their theological and ethical paradigm shifted in a dramatic fashion, and the world has never been the same since.

In the history of the Church, there have been many paradigm shifts. The Protestant Reformation was one. The Wesleyan revival of the Anglican Church was another. There have been many since. Think about it. Mike Estes and I will be going to Annual Conference beginning today. Presiding over the Annual Conference will be a bishop who is an African-American, and he is not the first one who has been our bishop. That took a major paradigm shift in the church along the way. That took an opening of minds to see that the way scripture had been interpreted in the past could not be what it really means. That took seeing what the Bible says about such things as freedom and equality with a new set of lenses.

As a part of Annual Conference, we will hear a report from the Dean of Perkins School of Theology at SMU. He may mention the fact that there are now more women than men preparing to be ministers in our denomination. That took a major paradigm shift in the church along the way. That took an opening of minds to see that what had been understood traditionally as the role of women in the church did not quite square with the real intent of scripture. That, too, required a new set of lenses. And there are other paradigm shifts just over the

horizon for United Methodists, waiting to be affirmed and embraced by an open-minded church.

New understandings, paradigm shifts, changes of views, transformation of minds and hearts can only come about when minds are open. Closed minds don't grow, don't develop, don't expand, don't mature, don't strengthen, don't progress, and don't ascend. Only open minds do. That's why the slogan for the United Methodist Church is what? *Open hearts, open minds, open doors.* Doors can't open unless hearts and minds open first. Close-minded churches don't grow. They die.

That's because of what this passage from Luke tells us. The church was started by a small group of individuals with open minds, minds that Jesus himself opened to a fresh understanding of the meaning of scripture. In other words, *the very foundation of the church is open-mindedness.* Without the willingness of people to have their minds opened to the truth of God's way and will, there is no church. As the writer of Ephesians states, Christ is "the head of all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." But even Christ can't fill what is not open.

This passage teaches us that Jesus wants his followers to ascend in their understanding of what it really means to have faith in God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. And Jesus sends upon

his followers that Spirit by which their minds can continue to open up. May we keep our minds open so as to experience the ascension of our understanding of what God would have us be and do as individual Christians and as the body of Christ, the church, for the sake of the world and to the glory of God.