

I. INTRODUCTION

A. GOODBYES SUCK

You know, if there's one thing I hate, it's goodbyes.

Anyone else here hate goodbyes?

Yeah, and the fact that I hate them so much means I'm not really very good at goodbyes.

Sometimes I get awkward and silent.

Sometimes I get awkward and really chatty!

Heck, sometimes I get awkward and I make poor choices, like the one time when I was getting ready to say goodbye to my family when they dropped me off at college.

They were looking forward to a final dinner with me, in the school cafeteria, before they left.

But I was worried about the awkwardness of saying a tearful goodbye between packed tables and chairs, so I suggested that they just leave.

Let's just say that my family wasn't very happy. And me? Neither was I. I ate my first college meal all alone.

Goodbyes suck. And I often suck at goodbyes.

Why am I telling you this?

Well, for one thing, this is my "goodbye" sermon here at St. Peter's, and I wanted to give an excuse for this sermon, if it sucks! 😊

In all seriousness, I do want to thank this congregation for being such a good place for Rachel and me to serve and grow alongside you.

Thank you for loving Rachel and me as our brothers and sisters in Christ. We will miss you all very much as we move to Illinois this week.

[Pause...]

Anyways, I don't want this goodbye to get TOO awkward, so I'd better keep on preaching!

I think that **goodbyes are bad because they so often leave our stories unfinished.**

And we humans tend to hate unfinished business.

It's so much better when the story has an end! Sometimes, even a bad ending is better than no ending at all!

Think about it, if you're watching an important game on TV – say, Alabama vs. Auburn – would you rather see the ending, even if your team loses, or have the power go out and completely miss the final minutes?

Stories without endings are **frustrating.**

And that's why it's so hard to say goodbye.

That's why Death – the ultimate goodbye, if you will – is so **horrible.**

It's not really an ending, not for those of us who go on living, anyways.

Instead, **Death leaves our stories hanging,** with words left unsaid and promises left unfulfilled.

I think here of parents in **Manchester** this week who were forced to say goodbye to their children all too soon, thanks to the suicide bombing.

Or the **Coptic Christians in Egypt** forced to say goodbye to their loved ones too soon, thanks to the bus attack.

Goodbyes suck, because they leave our stories unfinished.

B. WHAT ABOUT THE ASCENSION?

Is the Ascension of Jesus Christ, then, just another awful goodbye?

I mean, think about the emotional rollercoaster Christ's followers must have ridden in those days.

Rising hopes of God's coming kingdom dashed to the ground at the Crucifixion – only to rise once more at the Resurrection!

“Jesus, you're alive! Surely, surely now's the time when you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel, right?!”

“I mean, you had us worried there for a minute, what with the whole executed like a common criminal thing... but SURELY now's the time!”

“Seize the day! Take the throne! Kill these Romans, won't you?! Won't you?!”

... Now, I'm sure that the Ascension was glorious. After all, Luke tells us that the disciples worshipped and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

But **the Ascension was still a goodbye.**

And I'm sure that, eventually, the glory faded as the disciples gazed into heaven. And they needed the angels' reminder:

“Men of Galilee, who do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” [Acts 1:11].

OK, so maybe it's fairer to say that **the Ascension was a “see-you-later.”**

Fine.

But doesn't the Ascension still leave things hanging?

Doesn't it still leave our story – and the story of the Gospel – unfinished?

Well, yes...and no.

C. TITLE:

If I might paraphrase the angels' message in Acts 1 as the title of my sermon, here it is:

“It's finished! So, get to work!”

“It's finished! So, get to work!”

D. MAIN POINT:

And here's my main point:

The Ascension completes the Gospel and compels the Church.

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II. HOW DOES THE ASCENSION COMPLETE THE GOSPEL?

How does the Ascension complete the Gospel?

Well, that requires knowing what the Gospel is, so here goes:

A. THE GOSPEL

In the **beginning**, God created the entire universe to be his temple, his kingdom – the place where he would dwell and rule.

And he created **human beings** – his image-bearers, his ambassadors, his “middle-management” – to extend his rule and reign throughout creation.

Instead of doing this, however, human beings **rebelled** against God.

Instead of bowing the knee to the King, they tried to steal his throne.

And this rebellion brought **Sin and Death** into the kingdom – **breaking the relationships**

- between **God** and **humanity**,
- between **humanity** and **itself**,
- and between **humanity** and the rest of **creation**.

Where once there was perfect fellowship and communion, there was now **distance** and **Exile**.

And the story would have ended there, a tragedy, were it not for the goodness of our great God.

Because, you see, God was not going to let Sin, Death, and Exile have the final word! No!

He would **pursue** his people, he would **buy them back** from their slavery to Sin and Death,

he would **cleanse** them from the inside out, and he would – one day – **bring them back home**.

The story of **God's rescue mission**, then, is the **Good News** – it's the **Gospel**.

In the **Old Testament**, the story of **Israel** is the beginning of this rescue mission.

In the Old Testament, God draws a people back into **covenant** relationship with himself.

And yet, the story of the Old Testament is left hanging on a **tragic** note.

Despite God's continuing goodness, faithfulness, and salvation, his people prove stubbornly faithless.

And, even though they technically dwell in the geographical Promised Land, they are still in **Exile**.

They are still ruled, in the halls of power, by their political enemies. And they are still ruled, in their hearts, by Sin and Death.

And the story would have ended there, a tragedy, were it not for the goodness of our great God.

Because, you see, in the **New Testament**, God **HIMSELF** goes into Exile **INSTEAD OF** his people, in order to bring them back home.

I'd like you to picture this as a **capital letter "V"**.

Up here, you've got the eternal Son of God – fully divine.

Down here, is us. Drowning, as it were, in a cesspool of Sin and Death.

And instead of abandoning us...

(Heck, even instead of somehow saving us at an arm's distance, after we start to clean up and get our act together.)

...Christ dives headfirst into the muck – into the cesspool of sin-stained human existence.

We call this the **Incarnation**.

*So, great! God's with us! In..this...cesspool!
...Great?*

At the **Crucifixion**, Jesus goes all the way to the very bottom point of that capital V.

He goes all the way into the furthest, farthest Exile – Death.

So, great! God's dead.

How is this good news?!

Well, the story would have ended there, a tragedy, were it not for the goodness of our great God.

Because, you see, he went into the farthest Exile, so that we wouldn't have to.

And he didn't stay in the grave. No no no!

There's another side to the capital V!

We can't forget the **Resurrection!**

Jesus arose from the grave – he walked out of that tomb on Easter morning
AAAAANNNNND.....

...

Well, we don't know.

He appeared to some people. And then, well, we're not really sure what happened to him.

We're not really sure what it all meant.

...

The story would have ended there, left hanging between tragedy and triumph, were it not for the Ascension.

B. HOW THE ASCENSION COMPLETES THE GOSPEL

Brothers and sisters, we can't forget the Ascension!

The Ascension COMPLETES the Gospel!

The Ascension is **the final step** in Christ's **return from Exile**.

And, if we are united with Christ as a part of his body, the Church, the Ascension is the completion of OUR return from Exile as well!

The Ascension **demonstrates** that the Crucifixion and Resurrection were **the final victory over Sin and Death**.

Furthermore, the fact that Christ is not only crucified, and not only risen, but also ascended, and glorified, and seated on his heavenly throne means that **he is the LORD**.

Jesus Christ, though still fully human, though still fully acquainted with our many griefs, **is not your buddy**.

He's not your pal that you can ignore at your convenience.

No, **the Ascension reminds us that Christ is our King**.

He is our **Lord**. And he is to be **obeyed**.

But, hey, since the capital V is finished, and Christ is on the throne, that means that we can all just sit around and do **nothing**, right?!

As long as we're not doing something horrible?

I mean, the story's OVER! I thought that's what you just said, Josh.

No, not quite!

The Ascension does complete the Gospel – as its **goal** and **culmination**.

We will all one day be with Christ at the Father's right hand in glory.

But **the story's not over**, because **the Ascension also compels the Church**.

The Ascension completes the Gospel, and it also compels the Church.

II. HOW DOES THE ASCENSION COMPEL THE CHURCH?

How does the Ascension compel the Church?

Well, the Ascension gives the Church

- its **global mission**,
- its **enduring hope**,
- and its **enabling power**.

Everyone with me so far?

We've talked about the Ascension's **theological significance**, how the Ascension completes the Gospel.

Now let's talk about the Ascension's **application to our lives** – how the Ascension should both challenge us and encourage us.

A. THE ASCENSION GIVES THE CHURCH ITS GLOBAL MISSION

Here's the challenge of the Ascension: **it gives the Church its global mission**.

As Luke told us twice today – in the book of Acts and the Gospel which bears his name – Jesus commissioned his followers as witnesses who were to **proclaim the Good News** across **cultural and ethnic boundaries**.

“to all nations” – that word, “nations,” *ethnoi*, more properly refers to people groups, to cultural and *ethnic* groups of people, than to modern nation states.

That is, there are plenty of *ethnoi* represented right here in the United States – including those that haven't yet heard the gospel!

You remember what I said a minute ago about Jesus not being our buddy?

He's our King! He's to be obeyed!

And he wants us **to proclaim the gospel to the entire world**.

Which, let's be honest, is easier said than done.

Why?

Because **God's global gospel runs counter to the nationalistic, tribalistic, and individualistic “gospels” of this earth**.

The Good News of God's global kingdom – won not through self-promotion or military conquest but through self-sacrifice and loving

one's enemies – this gospel runs counter to the **false gospels** of this world, including the false gospel of the **American Dream**.

And that cuts right across the grain of the entire political landscape – red state and blue state.

Now to be sure, hear me!, **there is a difference between globalism and God's global gospel.**

But there is also a stark difference between the United States of America and the Kingdom of God – between American culture and Kingdom culture.

Let us, then, take heed, lest we American Christians make assimilation to American culture an unofficial prerequisite for the nations of the world.

There is **no** prerequisite.

There is **no** response of the world that gives the Church an **excuse** to abandon its global mission.

In light of the Ascension, the Church's global mission is **to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ across all cultural and ethnic boundaries** – obeying its Ascended Lord, who once said:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you**” [Matt. 5:43-44].

OK, so this transcultural, enemy-loving gospel stuff sounds great hypothetically, but

- what about when people **blow themselves up to kill children** at a concert in Manchester?
- What about when people **open fire on a bus full of Coptic Christians** on their way to pray?
- What about when they **go on shooting sprees** in shopping malls, movie theaters, schools, and churches?

- Or what about when people are just so **different**, so **unfamiliar**, so **awkward**, that we just don't know what to say?

What then?

Do we throw up our hands in despair?

B. THE ASCENSION GIVES THE CHURCH ITS ENDURING HOPE

Here's the *encouragement* of the Ascension: **it gives the Church its enduring hope.**

Without the Ascension, we are left wondering whether the good news of Christ's resurrection will extend to **us**.

We are left wondering whether the **chaos** in the world around us will ever cease.

How long, O Lord? How long before you stay the hand of the wicked?

How long before you destroy the earthly powers and dominions and authorities that divide us and destroy us?

Friends, we can still ask these questions today, but **it makes all the difference in the world that Christ has ascended.**

It makes all the difference in the world that Christ has been **enthroned over all earthly powers and dominions and authorities.**

Why?

Because the Ascension **shows that Christ has triumphed over his enemies.**

The way of the Cross has won out over the sinful ways of this world.

And the Ascension also **anticipates the second coming of Christ.**

Just like Jesus did not stay in the grave, he will not stay at a distance upon his heavenly throne – present in the Church only sacramentally.

No!

And just like he did not let Sin and Death have the final word, he will not let the servants of Sin and Death have the final word, either.

Instead, he will one day stay the hand of the wicked.

He will one day **disarm** and **destroy** those who have decided to persist in rebellion against him.

**Christ is enthroned over all earthly powers!
This is our enduring hope!**

There's no reason for us to **hedge our bets**, as it were, by bending the knee to any earthly power – friend or foe.

Instead, **the Church can freely exist for the sake of the world**, because we know that the world is in the hands of our ascended King.

C. THE ASCENSION GIVES THE CHURCH ITS ENABLING POWER: THE HOLY SPIRIT

So, you know, just get out there and try harder to love people and let them know about Jesus, no matter how different they are!

Right?!

Wrong.

We're not fooling anyone. We can't do this on our own.

Sure, we've got a global mission. And sure, we've got an enduring hope.

But we still need enabling power.

And the Ascension gives the Church its enabling power: the Holy Spirit.

At the end of Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples:

“And behold, I am sending the **promise** of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with **power** from on high” [Luke 24:53].

And, at the beginning of Acts, Jesus

“ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the **promise** of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the **Holy**

Spirit not many days from now” [Acts 1:4-5].

A few verses later, Jesus says:

“But you will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my **witnesses** in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and **to the end of the earth**” [Acts 1:8].

Now, I know I’m getting a bit ahead of myself.

After all, it’s still a week until **Pentecost!**

But, brothers and sisters, **we can’t make it, not even for a week, without the Holy Spirit!**

We are only gathered here this morning, some two thousand years since the Ascension, on the other side of the world, because **the Holy Spirit has empowered the Church to fulfill its global mission.**

And, even though we live in a divided, divisive, and terrifying world, the Holy Spirit can empower the Church today.

So, thanks be to God that the Ascension and Pentecost go hand in hand!

THE ASCENSION

COMPLETES THE GOSPEL

AND COMPELS THE CHURCH

TO FULFILL ITS GLOBAL MISSION,

CLINGING TO ITS ENDURING HOPE,

EMPOWERED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.

So, Father, we thank you for your persistence and patience to rescue us from Sin and Death.

Jesus, we bow the knee and worship you, our Ascended Lord. And we ask you to come again soon and make all things new.

And Holy Spirit, we ask you come. Give us the strength to love our neighbors and our enemies by proclaiming and living the gospel.

Amen.