

ST. ANDREW'S, BLACKROCK & BRAY - 16TH MAY 2021

ASCENSION SUNDAY - COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

“Welcome to our ‘Church at Home’ service transcript for the 16th May 2021. This Sunday we celebrated being back together again in our church building for the first time in over five months! Whether you were able to join us in person or not, I pray that you will be encouraged by reading this transcript today.” - Rev. Andrew Gill

Call to Worship – Psalm 47:1-5, 8-9

*Clap your hands, all you nations;
shout to God with cries of joy.
For the Lord Most High is awesome,
the great King over all the earth.
He subdued nations under us,
peoples under our feet.
He chose our inheritance for us,
the pride of Jacob, whom he loved.
God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.*

*God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on his holy throne.
The nobles of the nations assemble
as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted.*

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,

you are our refuge and our stronghold, a timely help in trouble. We give you praise and thanks for how you have sustained us during this pandemic, and that once again in our land church buildings are open for worship.

Lord God, we give glory to your holy name, for your goodness alone has kept and preserved us. Continue your mercies to us, that we may always acknowledge that you are our Saviour and our mighty deliver; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Almighty God,

your Son Jesus Christ ascended beyond horizons which our eyes can see, and further than the limits which our minds can reach, so that he might fill all things. Grant that your Church on earth may be filled with his presence and that he may remain with us always, to the end of the world; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Reading - Luke 24:44-53

Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and[d] returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Sermon - 'Above'

I spent most of the last lockdown circulating between three different chairs. Each day I went from sitting in my study chair, to sitting in the kitchen chair, to sitting on the couch, then repeated that same cycle over and over again! Maybe you have had similar experience over the last few months. But then this week everything changed. Maybe you found yourself sitting in the driver's seat of the car, or sitting in the barber's chair for that much needed hair cut, or sitting in the house of a friends that you haven't seen in a long while. And of course here we are on Sunday back sitting in a pew in church.

However, today I do not want us to look back to where we were sitting, nor to look around to where we are sitting. Today I want us to look up, and consider where Christ is sitting.

The last Sunday churches were open, was Christmas day, when we celebrate the birth of Christ. At first I was hopeful that we would be back in church for Easter, when we mark the death and resurrection of Christ. But then as time was going on I felt like we might not be back in church until the return of Christ! But thankfully here we are today, and in the church calendar today is the Sunday that follows Ascension Day. The ascension of the Lord is not an event we that tend to think too much about, but it is just as important and significant as Christmas and Easter. After Jesus' death and resurrection he appeared to his disciples, and taught them for 40 days before he ascended up to heaven. We worship Christ not because he lived and died, nor just because he lived, died, and rose again, but because he lived, died, rose, and now reigns on high!

So on this Sunday after Ascension, when we celebrate being together in church for the first in over five months, I want us to look at what Paul wrote in Colossians 3:1-4, *“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.”*

Paul says to set our hearts and minds on things above, because he knows how easy it is for us to focus on earthly things. Perhaps today your heart and mind is still very much filled with the emotions and the effects of months of lockdown. Maybe you are sitting in your problems, your worries, and your fears. The New Testament book of Colossians is one of Paul's 'lockdown letters' that he is writing from prison. But even though he sits in chains, he has a fullness and a freedom because he is looking up. Paul has set his thoughts and affections on heaven, because that is where Jesus is.

It is important to remember that when we talk about Jesus going to heaven, it means something different to when a believer dies. If I were to die tonight, my soul would go up to heaven, but my body would go down to the grave. But Christ physically ascended into heaven, and his body is in heaven right now, seated at the right hand of God. To be 'at the right hand of God' is a symbol of honour, power, and authority. In Psalm 110:1 David writes, *“The Lord said to my Lord: ‘sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’*

Jesus is at the right hand of God, he is sitting in victory, triumphant over his enemies. This is why the ascension matters to us today. Right now Christ is sitting in the highest throne in heaven, he is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. He reigns over everything. And if Jesus is sitting on the highest throne in heaven, then that means that no one or nothing else is. Covid-19 is not sitting on the throne. Illness is not sitting on the throne. Fear is not sitting

on the throne. Neither is poverty, war, nor injustice. Death and evil do not reign over this world, Jesus does. There have been many times over this last year when knowing that Christ is above has encouraged and comforted me.

Remember too, who it is that sits on the throne. Jesus the friend of sinners, Jesus who had compassion on the sick, Jesus who was kind to outsiders, Jesus who taught the world to love. It's Jesus who was betrayed, beaten, mocked, abandoned, suffered, and died. The one who sits on the highest throne in heaven, is the one who knows the depth of our humanity. He is our King, and he is our High Priest, so he is able to intercede on our behalf and help us in our weakness. Because Jesus has ascended as our King and High Priest we cannot only tell God how big our problems are, but we can also tell our problems how big our God is!

We set our hearts and minds on things above because it is where Christ is seated in power at the right hand of God, but it is also where we are. Through faith we have been spiritually united with Christ, so Pauls say in these verses that we died *with* Christ, we were raised *with* Christ, and now we live *with* Christ. That life is hidden, we can't see it, but it is our spiritual reality. If you haven't already heard, the big news from the manse is that Julie is pregnant, and we are expecting a little baby in November! We have been to the doctor, done tests, and had scans, but we can't actually see the baby. Our child is unseen, its life is hidden in Julie. In a similar way our life is hidden in Christ. We don't see it now, but the reality is that we have spiritual unity with Christ. With him we have died to sin and fear, been raised to eternal life, and when he returns we will appear with him in glory! So now we seek after him, and we desire that future glory.

Today, let us not look back to where we have been sitting, nor look around to where we are sitting, but let us look up to where Christ is sitting and know that our life is hidden in him. Even though we cannot see it, right now, as you read this, Christ is in heaven. He is sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. All

power, and glory, and honour are his. If you could look at his hands, you would see the scars where the cruel nails held him to the cross. And if you could listen, you would hear choirs of angels worshiping him. Even though we cannot sing in church under current restrictions, today they are praising him at the top of their voices.

What we can only begin to imagine today, we will see it with our own resurrection eyes through our faith Christ. With confidence we will approach his throne and join in the heavenly worship that his holy name deserves! We have been raised with Christ, so let us set our hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Let us set our minds on things above, not on earthly things. For we died, and our lives are now hidden with Christ in God. When he who our life appears, then we will also appear with him in glory!

Closing Prayer

Glorious Father,
we pray to you, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, to send us your Spirit of wisdom and insight so that we might grow in the knowledge of your love.

Flood our hearts with light so that we can understand the confident hope you have given to us, your church, that you have called to be your holy people, and your rich and glorious inheritance.

Lord God, help us to live by faith and not by sight, and to understand the incredible greatness of your power. May the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honour at your right hand in the heavenly realms, be at work in us.

Lord Jesus, you reign above all rulers and authorities, not only in this world but also in the world to come. Fill us today with the fulness of yourself.
Amen.