

Lift up Your Hearts
Psalm 47 & Luke 24:44-53

Sixth Sunday of Easter/ 5th May 2024/Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

According to the liturgical calendar, this Thursday is the Feast of the Ascension, marking the start of Ascensiontide, the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost. If I were a betting man—which I'm not, as Presbyterians tend to frown on games of chance, but if I were betting man—I would wager that most Presbyterians, indeed a majority of Protestants, have not given much attention to this feast day or given a lot of thought about the theological significance of Christ's ascension. Ascension is often overlooked by most Protestants. It might feel like a "Catholic" thing.

I remember being in Europe in early May, more than thirty years ago, when I lived in Scotland, I traveled in the south of France. I remember it was a Thursday, and I couldn't figure out why all the banks, post offices, shops, and restaurants were closed. I couldn't figure out what holiday they were celebrating. To my surprise, it was Ascension Day. Indeed, throughout Europe, Ascension Day is a public holiday in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, parts of Switzerland (the Catholic cantons), Denmark, Norway, and Iceland, but, oddly, not in Italy or Spain. In some countries, people take Friday off too and enjoy a four-day weekend. It was all surprising for this American Protestant.

We have two brief references to Christ's ascension in the New Testament. Luke 24:51: "While [Jesus] was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven." The earliest manuscripts of this Gospel, ends verse 51 with "he withdrew from them," and lacks "and was carried up to heaven." Later, Luke writes in Acts 1:2 about Jesus "being taken up to heaven." So, only Luke tells us about the Ascension.

In the first centuries of the church, though, Christ's bodily ascension took on theological significance. Historically, it ranks with the Passion and Pentecost, but one would never guess that today. For Tertullian (c. 155 – c. 220), one of the early church fathers, the Ascension is a guarantee that we will all find resurrection eventually in Christ. Writing in the 4th century, Eusebius (d. 339) hints at the celebration of this feast. In the 5th century, Augustine (354-430) said it had apostolic origin. John Chrysostom (d. 407) and Gregory of Nyssa (c.335 - c.395), also writing in the 4th century, refer to this feast throughout their writings. Around the same time, we find in the Apostles' Creed, written in the 5th century, this confession, "On the third day [Jesus] arose from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty." That's how important our forebears considered Ascension. They made it part of the creed.

Despite its central place in the Christian tradition, Ascension seems to be an exotic notion for contemporary Presbyterians. I've never encountered a Presbyterian church named Ascension Presbyterian Church. But it might come as a surprise to know that the doctrine of the Ascension was central for John Calvin (1509-1564). For Calvin, the Ascension means that our relationship to the Risen Christ is no longer restricted to the boundaries of space and time. The Ascended Christ is now available to all people all the time through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Calvin said we can appropriate three “benefits” of Christ’s Ascension for our faith. First, through Ascension-faith, we experience Christ “transfusing us with his power.” Calvin envisions Jesus as high and lifted up, seated at the right hand of God, where God “lavishes spiritual riches” upon “his own people,” said Calvin. Second, Ascension-faith experiences Christ as a “constant advocate and intercessor” who “prepares a way and access for us to the Father’s throne.” He sees Christ persuading the Father’s heart to look with favor upon us, removing any fear that we might have to approach the throne of God. The third and most important benefit is that Ascension-faith discovers that Christ’s Ascension, Calvin says, “has opened the way into the Heavenly Kingdom, which had been closed through Adam.”¹ The Ascension is nothing short of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, a new age in which faithful Christians find that they have access, through Christ, to God’s ultimate reality and purposes.

In his most striking commentary on the Ascension, Calvin says: “Since (Christ) entered heaven in our flesh, as if in our name, it follows, as the apostle says, that *in a sense we already sit with God in the heavenly places in him* (Christ).” At the Ascension, our humanity, our “flesh,” has been “taken” (Acts 1:11) by God’s Beloved One into the very heart of God. This is profound good news for us as Christians and for our whole world. Christ carries our humanity up into the redemptive heart and work of God. It means we are more deeply valued, loved, and held by God than we may have known.

Presbyterian theologian John McClure is helpful here. “All of human life at the Ascension,” he says, “moves even more emphatically to God’s side! All, in Christ, are moving, sometimes with sparks flying, more deeply into God’s being and becoming. In Christ’s Ascension we have a vision of humanity in all of its depth and breadth being taken up into, being pulled toward, the heart of God in Christ.”

Ascension means that we are, in a sense, already seated with God in the heavenly places with Christ. Ascension means we are sharing in the body and blood of the Ascended One. When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, Calvin believed, the church is lifted up into the presence of the Ascended One. Calvin had a high sacramental view of the Lord’s Supper. It was more than a memorial meal. He believed, informed by his theology of the Ascension, that in the meal, through the Holy Spirit, we are lifted up into the heavenly places and sit with Christ and all his saints in this Communion meal. We are brought into the heart of God, the redeeming heart of God, who lavishes spiritual gifts upon us. Calvin had a mystical view of the Lord’s Supper. In the meal, we participate and share in the life of the Risen Christ. You can see why Calvin advocated for weekly communion for the churches in Geneva.

We can also see why, for Calvin, the *sursum corda*, “Lift up your hearts,” is the heart of a Reformed understanding of Communion.² For centuries, the church’s liturgy has included this response at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer or Great Prayer of Thanksgiving: *Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord.* This is the *sursum corda*. And it remains the heart of the Communion liturgy for us today. It’s one of the most meaningful parts of Communion for me. *Lift up your hearts.* We share this meal in the presence, the real presence of the Risen Ascended Lord, who desires to bring us and works to bring us all into the very heart of God. *Thanks be to God.*

¹ John Calvin explored the three “benefits” of the Ascension in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559). I’m relying here on John McClure’s helpful summary in “The Ascension—a promise of great things to come.” [https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/ascension/#:~:text=In%20his%20most%20striking%20commentary,places%20in%20him%20\(Christ\).](https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/ascension/#:~:text=In%20his%20most%20striking%20commentary,places%20in%20him%20(Christ).)

² Cf. the quote from the bulletin by Reformed theologian T. F. Torrance (1913-2007): “Ascension introduced the ‘distance’ between the symbols of bread and wine on earth and the ascended Christ, but nevertheless a ‘distance’ bridged by the real presence of the risen and ascended Christ through the Spirit. Hence the place of the *sursum corda* [lift up your heart] in the heart of the Reformed Eucharistic Rite—the ascension with Christ became of primary importance again: we are made to sit with Christ in the heavenly places.” *Scottish Theology: From Knox to McLeod Campbell* (T & T Clark, 1996), 40, cited in David Fergusson, “The Ascension of Christ: Its Significance in the Theology of T. F. Torrance,” *Participatio*, vol. 3, pp. 92-107. <https://tftorrance.org/journal/v3/participatio-2012-v3-3-Fergusson-92-107.pdf>.