

May 18, 2023 – Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53

12 days ago, the world witnessed something that hasn't happened in 70 years: the coronation of a new British monarch. The coronation of a new British king, no less. That hasn't happened for 86 years, actually. Over 20 million people watched the coronation in the UK alone. Another 10 million watched in the United States. And it was quite the event, filled with tradition and history and royal regalia.

It was a moment Charles has been awaiting for a very long time, given the long life of his mother. Yet, I wonder if he's actually happy to be king now. Because a lot will change for him. He'll be under even more scrutiny. He'll be more distant from his friends and family. He won't be able to speak his mind as freely about certain matters. From what I understand, Charles had gotten into the habit of writing letters to various members of parliament expressing his opinion about different pieces of legislation. As king, he is forbidden by law to do that.

Charles' coronation shows that when a king ascends to his throne, it often means leaving behind the people and activities that he loves. It means that a separation has formed between him and his family and friends. He's way up on the throne, unreachable in his royalty.

The ascension of Jesus can feel very much the same way. Because the celebration of Ascension Day is very much a celebration of Jesus' coronation. That is the exact language that St Paul uses in our Epistle Lesson today. He tells us, *“[God the Father] raised [Jesus] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named.”*

In the Ascension, Jesus takes a place of authority and power that only comes from perfectly doing the Father's will, perfectly fulfilling the Father's plan of salvation, perfectly emptying himself and suffering death, even death on cross. For that, he is exalted and given the name above every name. For that he is seated at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly places. For that he is placed, seated, enthroned above every rule, authority, power and dominion.

The Ascension of Jesus is his coronation as king of kings and lord of lords. And this service tonight is a memorial of that coronation. The anniversary of the moment when the Father declared his Son's work to not only be finished, but worthy of the highest honor that can be given in heaven and on earth. The moment when Jesus was given authority over everything. Life and death. Heaven and hell. God's judgment and God's grace. All of it is in Jesus' hands. For He is the lamb who was slain sitting on his throne.

And that is a wonderful thing. Or, at least, it should be a wonderful thing. But it doesn't always feel so wonderful. Because our natural reaction is to see Jesus ascending into heaven, sitting on that throne, high above every creature, and wish that he were back here, among us. Like King Charles, leaving behind the life he knew before, we feel a bit left behind by Jesus' ascension.

I mean, wouldn't it be easier if he hadn't ascended? Wouldn't it be better if he were still here, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead? Wouldn't it be wonderful to have him available to answer questions and explain scripture and end all the division in the church today? Sitting on the throne of heaven is certainly nice for him, but what about us? What about our problems? What about this sinful world that he left us behind in?

Well, setting aside the fact that Jesus doesn't really owe us anything, I don't think this really solves the problem as well as we think it does. And the reaction of the disciples after Jesus' ascension is proof of that.

Because in the forty days after the resurrection, things have massively changed for the disciples. They understand things about Jesus that they never understood before. They understand things about Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection they never thought about until now. They understand things about Israel and God's relationship with his people, about everything that Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms said that they never dreamed of before. For the first time in their lives, their minds are completely open to the scriptures. Everything makes sense.

It is an exciting time to be Jesus' disciple. To be sitting at their Lord's feet. How many years did they go hearing parables that they just didn't get? How many times did Jesus say something to them and they just scowled and shook their heads in confusion? But now? They finally understand, now.

And then, just like that, he's gone. They went up on that mountain thinking that Jesus was going to lay out some amazing plan to restore the Kingdom of Israel. And instead, he just up and floats away. Vanishes behind a cloud. Poof.

And they are left staring into the clouds wondering, "What just happened? It was just getting good!" Jesus has ascended into heaven. He has entered into his coronation. He is enthroned at the right hand of the Father. From thence he will come again to judge the living and the dead. And that is exactly what the angels tell them. *"This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."*

But, surprisingly, they aren't upset. They aren't confused or bewildered. They don't continue to stare up into the sky. They worship him. And they return to Jerusalem with great joy.

Because they do understand. They understand better than we do. Jesus has not abandoned them. Jesus is not separated from them. Jesus is not way up in heaven while we are way down here on earth. Jesus has not left them behind.

He is doing exactly what he said he would do. He said that he would die. And he did. He said he would rise again. And he did. He said he would go away. And now he has. What's next? He said he would send his Holy Spirit. To comfort them. To strengthen. To teach them. And to guide them into all truth.

And so they go back to Jerusalem and they wait. They wait and they pray. Because they know that everything Jesus has said would happen has happened. So they have completely faith that the Holy Spirit will come. That they will be clothed with power from on high.

And they have complete faith that Jesus is still with them. He is with them always to the very end of the age. He will not leave them as orphans, but will come to them and be with them. He is the vine. They are the branches. They will be forever be attached to him. No one will snatch them out of his hand.

Jesus did not abandon us in his ascension. He did not become distant in his coronation. Instead, he drew even closer to us. Because, as Paul writes, the Father did *"put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."*

Jesus didn't leave us. No, in his Ascension, Christ made us his body. We're not separated from him. We're part of him. We are his hands and feet.

It's no wonder that after Pentecost the apostles immediately begin meeting to break bread together. To celebrate the sacrament together. Christ has promised to be with them always and so they turn to his very Body and Blood. And in receiving that Body and Blood they become his Body and Blood. We become his Body and Blood. The Church is the fullness of him who fills all in all.

How can Christ possibly be absent from us when he's right here, right now? In this fellowship of believers. In this Word that we hear. In this Holy Supper that we receive. Christ is sitting on his throne, but he is also sitting in these pews. He is also meeting with us at this very altar. He is also in the Word that fills each one of our hearts with faith.

Jesus is not a king who is far away and he did not ascend into heaven to separate himself from us. No, he ascended into heaven to be near us. In every problem of this world. In every failure of his people. In every sin, in every suffering, in every tear shed in grief. The king on his throne is the king who serves us.

Who lifts up his nail-scarred hands in blessing to a people who rarely understand just how much he loves us. And nothing, not life or death, height or depth, will separate us from that love. Amen.