

Sermon – May 29, 2022 - Ascension Day

Knowing Hope!

Ephesians 1:15–23

Dear friends in Christ

I greet you this morning with the word of Paul to the Ephesians: May “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him,” today and always! May He enlighten the “eyes of your hearts..., that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you”

Hope? Talking about hope these days, might seem counterintuitive. I think we live in a world where talking about hope is a little like burping at the dinner table. As much as we would like to have a bright day, there is always something that sucks the joy out of it. Personal or family issues, or simply hearing the news these days, seem to put a dumper on our day, and ruining it. Everything is so bad, how can there be real hope? With the rise of depression all around us, drug overdoses, mistrust, and hatred, can we still have lives based in hope?

I. We need hope.

The reality is that we need hope. And we are optimistic about that. Here is the thing though, hope is not the same as optimism. Hope is tied to action, not attitude, optimism on the other hand is an attitude. If we have hope then we can be optimistic about our day, that’s for sure.

The late British Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book *Celebrating Life*, pointed out that optimism is passive while hope is active. Or we can say that optimism is like having a gym membership. But Biblical hope is like going jogging every morning or going to the gym.

As the Oxford English Dictionary, defines hope as the: “the “expectation of something desired; desire combined with expectation.” And our expectation is not an idea but a person, it is not from within us but coming from heaven. Jesus Christ.

Now, despair is the opposite of hope. It leads to inaction, guilt, and fear. As Luther writes in the Small Catechism, when we pray “lead us not into temptation” we are asking that the Lord would “guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice” (Lord’s Prayer, Sixth Petition).

With hope, we are able to move through the day, the year, through life. Without hope, everything begins to grind to a halt. But where can we find true hope?

II. False hope is no hope at all.

Hope is not found in the lies of the world. Hope is not found in the false and misguided religious trends of today. In false cults or religion, false assertions of spiritual revelations of any kind, whatever hope they offer us, can be to the detriment of our peace and joy. I have heard preachers assuring their hearers that they have seen, they have been revealed in a special way, of God's plans and moving of the Spirit whatever it is that they want to sell us, be careful, because there will be no hope at the end of the rope. The hope they are offering is false and deadly. It can lead to bitterness, disillusion, bad living, rebellion against God. In short, false hope leads to despair and unholiness. As Jesus proclaimed, "A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit" (Mt 7:18).

But in our epistle reading this morning, we see that Paul points us to real hope to Jesus, and specifically to his ascension. Because God has raised Jesus "from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places" (v 20), we have a real hope for our own future, he says.

III. Real hope is found in Christ's ascension.

On this ascension Sunday we hear once again that Jesus was taking up into heaven. For many, Jesus is gone, and perhaps gone for good. But the reality is that Jesus is not gone. The ascension has more to do with a promotion rather than ascending to heaven and being taken away from the disciples.

And more than a promotion Jesus ascended to his rightful place, being the King of the world. John in the book of Revelation, says this: "Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!" ¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever

and ever!" ¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshipped. (Rev. 5:11-14)

He has become the King now, he is taking his rightful place in God's throne, for the sake of his people, and one day he will be taking us there, as he has done with those who have gone before us. He now stands as the Head, and we are members of the Body, the Church. Now, here is a beautiful thing, that if we are his body, then it means that if all things are under his feet, it means they are under ours as well (vs. 22–23) for we are the body, and if so, God trusts us to remain his people and his servants here and now.

We are trusted not because we are trustworthy, but because Jesus has called us. He has given us "the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" as our Paul points that out today (v 18). It is Jesus who has called us to sainthood by the will of the Father, and it is by the Spirit that we are given this wisdom and knowledge. This is the Good News: by Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension our sins are forgiven, and we inherit a portion of his riches by grace.

We do not walk, talk, and eat with Jesus as the early disciples did to be sure, having him only with certain number of disciples, but because he is ascended, he is with us all, and we can live lives of hope of being in his presence forever.

IV. We have and live in hope.

Yes, Christ is our hope and if we have Christ, we have hope, hope that the hopelessness of this world cannot overtake. We hear a message of hopelessness every day. The war in Ukraine and other parts of the world. The climate is changing, many cities will be flooded, and coastlines destroyed by waves of hurricanes. People say "Viruses will take away our freedoms and lives." Faith in institutions are collapsing and people are turning ever increasingly to violence to solve their problems. The market for hope is wide open, yet it seems people prefer false hope to the real one.

The prophets and marketers of false hope abound. "Eat this" or "take that" and you will live longer. "This stock will make you rich." "This party or person will save the country." "This prayer will make everything all right." Be careful, because they are just wolves in sheep's clothing are all around us.

But if we are in Christ, we do have hope, Jesus' ascension gives us real hope. And we know that there is a God and that he cared enough for you to send his Son to redeem you. You know that Son was crucified, died, and has ascended to rule over all things and be with us always as he promised (Mt. 28:20). Ascension doesn't mean he is "gone." It means he is present in all the places he said he'd be: in his Word, in his Sacraments, among his people. That is our hope.

That's the hope we gather under this morning. This is the hope the apostle prays for God's people to deeply know: "I do not cease... (to) pray, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you..." Vs. 17

You don't have this hope yet? We join Paul in this prayer that you too maybe revealed by the Holy Spirit, that the "eyes of your hearts" will be opened to understand the hope to which they have been called. To be enlightened by the Spirit is to see a certain hope, to expect a specific future outcome for the world and for ourselves. This hope is a glorious "inheritance," a possession not earned but received by relationship with Jesus Christ. Our "hope," is in receiving the inheritance that is already ours on account of the work of Jesus.

And because Jesus has ascended to his rightful place and all the world is in his hands, and the buck now stops with him who is above "every rule and authority and power and dominion . . . and every name that is named." My hope becomes so real.

What do I do when I'm disturbed and even angry at what happens in the world? I turn to hope.....

You know, the human life is driven by how we conceive of our past, our present, and our future. Do we look back on the past with wistfulness, with pride, or with guilt? Are we happy with our present lot or depressed by who and where we are? Do we view the future with anticipation or with dread? Remember this, the past is with forgiveness and reconciliation. The present is with the Lord's Supper and Christ's presence in his words of promise. And our future is in our ascending to the presence of Jesus' Father and our Father, to his God and our God (Jn 20:17). That is our glorious inheritance.

Conclusion: Ascension is unique, in that its central message is hope. It centers our faith, strengthens us for what lies ahead, and gives us the promise of a better future. Christ ascended to ensure us of our eternal place with Him.

As the great hymn says, God “has raised our human nature On the clouds to God’s right hand; There we sit in heav’nly places, There with Him in glory stand. Jesus reigns, adored by angels; Man with God is on the throne. By our mighty Lord’s ascension We by faith behold our own” (LSB 494:5).

That is our hope. Amen.