

## Jesus Is Lord

sermon digest

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Acts 1:6-11; Ephesians 4:3-13

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One of the richest moments in my life of ministry came in 1971 in St. Louis, Missouri. Carolyn and I were newly married and had moved to a new suburban church on the west side of the city. At a church conference in town, I met Brooks Ramsey, the pastor of my childhood and my baptism, a man I had long admired as a hero in faith. At age twenty-seven he was a vibrant preacher, who was invited by Billy Graham in the 1952 Houston crusade to join his ministry. But years later, Ramsey's pilgrimage led him far afield from Graham's mass evangelism to issues of social justice.

After a ministry in Albany, Georgia, where his call for racial integration earned a cross-burning in his yard and an attempt to terminate his ministry, he moved to a church in Memphis, his hometown. After the 1968 murder of Martin Luther King, Brooks marched with other pastors in the city in support of striking garbage workers and a call for racial justice. This was the last straw for his church; the move to fire him failed by a few votes. He left Memphis and moved to an old downtown St. Louis church in a racially changing neighborhood near Washington University. I was invited by friends in his congregation to speak at a women's luncheon, and I finally had an opportunity to talk with my childhood hero.

We sat on a pew in the old sanctuary, facing an elaborate painting of the Ascension, Jesus in the clouds with outstretched arms and eyes toward the heavens. Brooks shared his struggle to move the inner-city congregation to provide ministry, including childcare and a medical clinic, to the community. He confessed his failure. They preferred to invest funds in paying off-duty policemen to guard their cars during worship. He commented that the congregation was more committed to protecting Cadillacs than caring for God's children. Then he pointed to the painting of the ethereal Jesus above and behind the pulpit and observed that when the vision of Jesus is up in the clouds, people lose sight of his ministry to the poor, the hungry, and the rejected people on the ground.

***The upward gaze of the Ascension can be a distraction from ministry.*** Following forty days after Easter, last Thursday—always on Thursday—the Christian calendar observes the day the risen Christ ascended from a hilltop outside of Jerusalem into the heavens. Although ignored or viewed with either embarrassment or humor by the modern scientific mind, the Ascension was affirmed in the ancient creeds. The Apostle's Creed, recited weekly in many congregations, simply affirms: "The third day he rose again from the dead: He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty: From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

The three-story universe of the ancient world pictured an up-down perspective on the structure of the world that places God in the heavens above and evil in the abyss below. Every school child knows that the clouds floating above our heads are far below the outer reaches of the universe, and every adult Christian is aware that we can no longer think of God in terms of location or place, especially the biblical distinction between heaven and earth. Yet, we still carry in our minds the image of the ancient world of "God up there."

In the 1950's, country singer Patsy Cline set to music the popular piety in her song on prayer, "Have You Talked with the Man Upstairs?" Of course, the song came before the US and Soviet space programs and the landing on the moon. Although I doubt the theological value of the song at several points, the "Man Upstairs" was a popular figure for God that still bounces around in street language piety.

A few years ago, when I indicated a plan to preach on the Ascension, the church organist offered to play "Up, Up and Away" for the Prelude. I recently encountered an Ascension sermon online, "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down." Another interpreter called the Ascension the original rapture, a play on the popularized notion of Dispensational, end-time theology. But we still have not escaped the up-down language of the Bible. We still refer to depression as being "down" and to a healthy attitude as being "up."

Ancient temples were usually constructed on high places like hills and mountains to be closer to the gods. The Jerusalem Temple was constructed thrice on Mount Zion. But even the ancient biblical world seemed to be aware that God transcends our hilltops and mountains. Psalm 121 was radically revised in the RSV to read, "I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help

comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Rather than a call to find God in the hills, the psalmist pointed beyond the hills to the Creator of heavens and earth. God was always beyond the hills, beyond the clouds, beyond all of the gods, Maker of heaven and earth.

The Ascension of Jesus marks the point of transition from the earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth to the heavenly Christ enthroned as Lord, at the right hand of God. After the Gospels, the Christian scriptures envision Jesus the Christ in the presence and very being of God, and the most basic creed of Christian faith, Jesus is Lord, seems to affirm the unity of Jesus with the God of Creation. An early Christian prayer in Aramaic was “Marana-tha”—Our Lord, come! The Hebrew word for Lord *Adonai* was substituted for the name of God JHWH in reading Hebrew scriptures. The ascended Christ was clearly identified with the God of the ages. John’s Gospel even begins the story of Jesus with the creation, “In the beginning was the Word. . . .”

**The ministry of Jesus continues.** Acts opens with the Ascension. The key moment is the message from “two men in white robes”: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” It was time to move on. The work of Christ had not ended; it had just begun.

University of North Carolina religion professor Bart Ehrman has just published his latest book challenging the authenticity of traditional Christian orthodoxy, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*. Ehrman has become the notorious scholar of Christian studies because of his cynical interpretations of sacred subjects and his supposed fall from Christian Fundamentalism into an admittedly agnostic view of life. A few years ago I was asked by a friend in Rotary for my opinion: “Is Ehrman a Christian?” A year later Ehrman answered the question for himself in the negative in his book *God’s Problem*. Today Ehrman seriously confesses that his stance has changed. He no longer stands with Christians asking the famous question of Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus homo*—why did God become man? He now stands with historians of Christianity asking “how did Jesus become God?” He is no longer moved by the mystical and miraculous. He just wants the facts of history.

I have no more need to agree with Ehrman’s conclusions than he needs to agree with mine, but I have found much to admire in his research and writing and have no problem in affirming many of his perceptions of history. For example, his observation, “Jesus did not spend his preaching ministry in Galilee proclaiming that he was the second member of the trinity,” has a general consensus among Christian scholars. The identity of Jesus with God, Son and Father, is a development in early Christian history, not a simple observation or claim from the Jesus of history.

I would further observe that the followers of Jesus did not move away from ministry to the poor, the sick, and the excluded in order to formulate the Trinity and build beautiful cathedrals. Early Christians found strength in their confession “Jesus is Lord” to move into the world where Jesus walked, suffered, and died. They found in the continued ministry of Jesus power from above, if you will. The high Christology of the Ascension sent the church into the world to bind up the wounds of humanity.

So Paul addresses the gifts of ministry in the church in his letter to Ephesians with an interlude reference to the ascension of Jesus: “When it says, ‘He ascended’, what does it mean but that he had also descended. . . .” Spiritual gifts came from the eternal Christ.

Barbara Rossing observed that one of the traditional locations of the Ascension outside Jerusalem is on the highest point of the Mount of Olives where today a hospital stands administered by the Lutheran World Federation. On the grounds of the hospital, the Church of the Ascension contains a mosaic of the ascending Jesus, but Rossing notes that the gaze is not toward the heavens. Attention is drawn toward the world. She concludes, “if Jesus’ Ascension is to have meaning, it must be by way of underscoring Jesus’ presence still on earth. And that is through us.”

My hero Brooks Ramsey was right to call the church into action to ministry in the name of Jesus. But we do not have to choose between worship and service in the ministry of Christ.