

"Our Ascension Because of His"
John 14:1-6

May 9, 2013

Ascension Day

For many thousands of years, man longed to fly. No matter how hard he tried or how intently he longed for it, one strong force continued to hold him back: gravity. Thus, people would say, "If God intended for man to fly, He would have given him wings." In other words, to soar through the heavens, man would need help to accomplish it. So, various inventors began tinkering with "flying machines" that would free man from the bonds of gravity and allow him to fly through the sky until, finally, at the turn of the twentieth century, Orville and Wilbur Wright succeeded in building their "aero-plane".

We take flying so much for granted these days that even the launches of rocket ships into outer space is met with "ho-hums" from many people. Imagine when flying was new (and some of you can probably remember that). Imagine what it was like to actually see someone take off "into the wild blue yonder" for the first time. But what good would watching that do, really, other than to serve as a thrilling experience, if you wanted to fly yourself? Watching someone fly would not satisfy your desire. Only if that person came back and gave you a ride into the sky would you be satisfied.

On this day when we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord, we are faced with a similar situation. His disciples stood with Him on the mountain as He ascended up into heaven. I'm sure it was a thrilling experience for them, as it would have been for us. But what good would it have done for them to have merely watched? What good does it do us to merely know and celebrate the Ascension of our Lord?

While not all people may desire to fly into the heavens, there is, in all people, a desire to fly up into heaven. I have never met a single person who said, "Pastor, I really don't want to go to heaven." Some people may not verbally express that wish. Some people may not speak of "heaven" per se, preferring to call it nirvana, the "happy hunting grounds", or some other name. Some may not even

believe in a place called "heaven", but no one wants life to end at the grave. Everyone wants to live on in a better existence. The Word of God calls this existence "heaven."

So, people will seek after God, trying to find a way to be closer to Him now and a way to soar upwards to be with Him after physical death. When people are not able to find the true God, they will invent a god of their own liking, a heaven-like place of their own imagination, and a plan for getting there some day.

Like gravity which holds us back from achieving physical flight into the heavens, so there is a force called sin that holds us back from achieving that flight into heaven. Sin is not merely naughty little acts that hurt ourselves and those people around us. Sin's presence in our life and its corruption of our very nature is a force that keeps us chained to this earth apart from God, unable to reach Him while we live and certainly unable to go to Him when we die.

Some get the notion that, if we just try harder to do better, that that will somehow help us in our flight to heaven. It makes sense in a way. If doing bad prevents us from going upwards into heaven, then doing good must help us go upward into heaven. Unfortunately, trying harder to do good in order to somehow make it to heaven is like jumping up and trying to flap your arms harder in order to somehow fly. It's just not going to work. Gravity is too strong for us to fly that way. Sin is too strong for us to ascend that way.

Since mankind needed the outside aid of a flying machine to finally soar into the heavens, it only stands to reason that man would need some outside aid to finally soar into heaven. God provided that help in His Son, Jesus Christ. He unshackled us from the weight of our sin by dying on the cross to take it away. He removed the barrier of death which kept us separated from God by overcoming the grave Himself and rising to life on Easter morning. We are primed and ready for the most glorious flight of our lives - into heaven and everlasting life with God and all of His saints. All we need now is a way to get there. And that's what the celebration of Ascension Day is all about.

Before Jesus went to the cross, before He rose from the dead, before He ascended into heaven, Jesus made the promise which is contained in our text for today. He said, "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also."

Jesus has taken care of everything. He came here, not to rule as King and Lord, but to prepare us for heaven by dying on the cross to forgive our sins and to give each of us His perfect righteousness in place of our sinfulness. He ascends, not to leave us in His celestial tail lights as He rushes back to His heavenly home, but to prepare heaven for us. The Father's house has many rooms ("mansions", as the old King James used to put it). Jesus is, at this very moment, personally preparing a personal place for each of us, as well as for all Christians who ever have or ever will trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

But that's not all. Jesus says, "I will come again." When Jesus ascended into heaven, His disciples stood there, staring up into heaven. They were perhaps confused or saddened by Jesus' departure and what it meant. They could have felt discouraged or alone because of His absence. But then two angels appeared and asked them, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." They no doubt remembered Jesus' words from our text and, as our Gospel reading says, "they returned to Jerusalem with great joy." We, too, can share in that same joy as we wait Jesus' assured return.

But Jesus will come again, not just to show Himself to us who have not seen Him, nor for a brief visit before returning to heaven, leaving us to struggle here. Jesus says, "I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." He comes to do that which we cannot do on our own -- bring us on that upward flight through the heavens to heaven itself for a celebration and a life that lasts forever.

Therefore, as you face the difficulties and uncertainties of life on this planet, heed the words of Jesus: "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me." Jesus has done what He and all the prophets said He would: redeemed us and brought us back into a loving relationship with the God who created us and who wants only good for us. He was born as was prophesied. He lived the perfect life as was prophesied. He died as He said He would. He rose from the dead as He said He would. He will do in the future what He has promised in the past. He *will* return and He *will* bring us to heaven to be with Him forever. Do not be troubled, worried, or afraid, no matter what this world flings in your face and no matter how dark the future appears to be. Jesus will come through. He will come back as promised and, whether you are dead or alive when He comes, He will bring you to your heavenly home as promised. The Apostle Paul summed up this exciting event this way this way:

"According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words."(1 Thess. 4:15-18)

A little known fact about Ascension Day is that it was once considered in the early church to be one of *the* four major church festivals. There was Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and Ascension. Today, it is mostly the forgotten festival which goes uncelebrated in most Christian Churches because people don't want to come out for a Thursday evening service in the last spring of the year and most pastors are tired of trying to force it on unwilling people. We have one because everything we hope for as Christians - to be physically and spiritually in the presence of God for all eternity in heaven depends on Ascension Day. If Christ did not or was not able to ascend into heaven, we would have no hope of ascending ourselves. But, because Christ has ascended, because He is preparing a place for us, and because He will return to take us to that place, our own ascensions are assured. So, be prepared for the flight of your lives. The takeoff is soon. Amen.

