

“The Glory of Jesus”

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He may be out of your sight, but you are never out of his mind.

Acts 1:6-11

The Glory of Jesus

(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Worst day ever

Until a couple of years ago, the Sunday after Easter was celebrated at Corinth as “Holy Humor Sunday.” In that spirit, I begin the service with a tale made famous in 1958 by a Brit named Gerard Hoffnung. Some say it’s true. It’s been shared in various forms by comedians, preachers, physics teachers, and probably insurance adjustors.

Dear Sir:

I am writing in response to your request for additional information in Block #3 of the accident reporting form. I put "Poor Planning" as the cause of my accident. You asked for a fuller explanation and I trust the following details will be sufficient.

I am a bricklayer by trade. On the day of the accident, I was working alone on the roof of a new six-story building. When I completed my work, I found I had some bricks left over which when weighed later were found to weigh 240 lbs. Rather than carry the bricks down by hand, I decided to lower them in a barrel by using a pulley which was attached to the side of the building at the sixth floor.

Securing the rope at ground level, I went up to the roof, swung the barrel out and loaded the bricks into it. Then I went down and untied the rope,

holding it tightly to insure a slow descent of the 240 lbs of bricks. You will note on the accident reporting form that my weight is 135 lbs.

Due to my surprise at being jerked off the ground so suddenly, I lost my presence of mind and forgot to let go of the rope. Needless to say, I proceeded at a rapid rate up the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel which was now proceeding downward at an equally impressive speed. This explains the fractured skull, minor abrasions and the broken collarbone, as listed in Section 3, accident reporting form.

Slowed only slightly, I continued my rapid ascent, not stopping until the fingers of my right hand were two knuckles deep into the pulley which I mentioned in Paragraph 2 of this correspondence. Fortunately by this time I had regained my presence of mind and was able to hold the rope, in spite of the excruciating pain I was now beginning to experience.

At approximately the same time, however, the barrel of bricks hit the ground-and the bottom fell out of the barrel. Now devoid of the weight of the bricks, the barrel weighed approximately 50 lbs.

I refer you again to my weight. As you might imagine, I began a rapid descent down the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming up. This accounts for the two fractured ankles, broken tooth and severe lacerations of my legs and lower body.

Here my luck began to change slightly. The encounter with the barrel seemed to slow me enough to lessen my injuries when I fell into the pile of bricks and fortunately only three vertebrae were cracked.

I am sorry to report, however, as I lay there on the pile of bricks, in pain, unable to move and watching the empty barrel six stories above me, I again lost my composure and presence of mind and let go of the rope. I lay there watching the empty barrel begin its journey back down on to me. This explains the two broken legs.

I hope this answers your inquiry.

Worst. Day. Ever. Right?

The incomparable one

I wonder if the disciples felt that way when Jesus ascended to the Father. OK, maybe Good Friday was still fresh on their minds as not only Jesus' day of unimaginable suffering, but as the day they scattered and denied him when he needed them most. Now he had been back just long enough for them to get comfortable. But on this day, they watched him leave, and they had a sense this time he was not coming back.

Since the beginning of Lent, we have been studying what Christians believe about Jesus Christ, using the words of the Apostles' Creed. Today we come to the final section of that second paragraph of the creed. Let's review where we've been.

(I believe) in Jesus Christ (God's) only begotten Son... The one we call Jesus is "the incomparable One" – the one and only Son of God. No one comes even close to him.

Our Lord... "Lord" is a powerful word with many meanings, but the confession "Jesus is Lord" means that he is Yahweh of the Old Testament. He is fully God.

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary... Jesus was a zygote, an embryo, a newborn, a toddler, a teenager, a son, a brother, a laborer, a teacher, a friend. He knew life as you and I know it, with all the good and bad.

Suffered under Pontius Pilate... The greatest suffering ever was endured by the best person ever to accomplish the greatest good ever.

Was crucified, dead, and buried... What matters to the Gospel is not so much Jesus' physical suffering, but his declaration, "It is finished." Done. He endured physical and spiritual death in our place, for our sins. Jesus paid it *all*.

He descended into hell... Jesus took our hell in every sense of that word. More specifically, he gloriously emptied Hades (aka Paradise) of believers who had died.

On the third day he rose again from the dead... He triumphed over sin and death. Mary Magdalene tried to hold on to the familiar Jesus on Easter morning, but he made her let go because he was ascending to the Father. That's where we go today.

Ascension

He ascended into heaven... Luke opens Acts saying Jesus spent forty days after the resurrection "giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen" (2). I wish we had more detail on what he told them, but whatever it was, they still seemed very, very confused.

On the day of his ascension, meaning that they had had seven more weeks of Jesus School, they "gathered around him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'" (6) John Calvin said there are as many errors as

words in their question. They still don't understand (a) what the kingdom is, (b) that it's not now, and (c) that it's not about them. Most importantly, they don't yet get God.

The text actually implies they *were asking* him – meaning repeatedly. I picture the disciples like kids in the back seat of the car asking, “Are we there yet?” Years ago my brother Doug told me about a long trip when his kids were little. He wanted to stop the incessant “Are we there yet?” questions. So he told his son, “Look – see those mile markers on the side of the road? We're at 286 right now. When we get to 514, we'll be there. You can see for yourself when we're almost there.” Doug said it was the longest road trip they ever took. From the back seat his son called out every single mile marker. “We're at 287 now, Dad! 288! There's 289!”

Patience is not hardwired into the human psyche. Jesus does not give them mile markers. He says, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set” (7). Strangely, many believers through the centuries have tried to set dates. Instead, he gives them a promise and a command. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses” (8). More on that verse later.

In verse 9 we come to the ascension proper. “After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.” Except when rain is involved, a cloud in the Bible always represents the presence and glory of God. This is the last of the physical evidences for the disciples that they had encountered God himself in the person of Jesus.

It's a common belief among Christians that Easter is as good as it gets. That's obviously when we have the highest attendance at church. That must be the peak of the story. It's one thing to rise from a tomb and breathe again, but forty days later that risen body rose from the surface of the earth. Still, it's not the levitation that's the glory. It's where he went – into his glory. The cloud symbolized a much greater glory.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “God exalted (Jesus) to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name” (Philippians 2:9). The apostles were witnesses to that exaltation in Acts 1. They thought at first it was the worst day ever, but in the years to come they realized it was the best ever.

Session

What happens next? That's exactly what the disciples are wondering. Luke tells us, “They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going” (10). Pause and picture the scene – mouths open, eyes moist, hearts pounding, minds racing.

Do *you* know where he went and what he's doing now? The answer to that question is so important to the story that almost every New Testament writer talks about it. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, and the writer of Hebrews all refer to where Jesus went when he left the earth and what he's doing there.

And sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty... If you have heard that phrase, my hunch is you haven't thought a lot about what it means. Does it mean there's a literal throne in heaven and God the Father is sitting on it? And that next to him is a kind of junior throne where Jesus sits? If it helps for you to visualize it that way, go ahead. Every description we have of heaven is an attempt to describe the indescribable. The reality is so much deeper.

Jesus is the one who started this talk, on two occasions, both recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The first occasion was Tuesday before he died, when the religious leaders were trying to trap Jesus with hard questions so they could have an excuse to kill him. They weren't very successful, so Jesus helped them out – because it was, indeed, time for him to die. He asked them a question. “Messiah – whose son is he?”

“The Son of David,” they answered.

“Hmmm. Then why does David call him ‘Lord’ when he says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand’? He was referring to Psalm 110:1. They were stumped.

Early Friday morning, the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah?” Jesus answered, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at God's right hand.” That was all they needed to declare him guilty of blasphemy, a capital offense.

The powerful image sticks with his followers. Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost: “You killed him, but now he's at the Father's right hand.” Stephen's being stoned to death and declares, “I see Jesus at the Father's right hand.”

The theme carries through into the letters of the New Testament. Paul writes that Jesus is at God's right hand interceding for us (Romans 8:34). The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus sat down at God's right hand because his sacrifice for sins was absolutely complete (Hebrews 10:12). Peter says he's there because he has authority over all the heavenly hosts (1 Peter 3:22).

Theologians call this Jesus' “session.” The word just means “sitting,” and you sit when your work is done, when you're in charge, when you're doing your work from a place of authority. If his resurrection wasn't glorious enough, there's his ascension. If his ascension wasn't glorious enough, there's his session. Still we're not done!

Return

From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead. As the disciples are paralyzed looking at the cloud where Jesus disappeared, Luke continues, “Suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them” (10). Most likely they were angels.

Clearly they have a message from God: “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” (11). These words are the foundation of Christian belief: “This *same* Jesus... in the *same* way.” We believe in the personal, physical, powerful return of Christ.

From here I could launch into a hundred directions, with fortunately no lack of Scriptures to expand on the topic, and unfortunately no lack of controversy among Christians about the details. If Jesus’ session is covered by almost every New Testament author, we can remove the word “almost” about Jesus’ second coming. It’s a great comfort to believers that he will “come again to judge the living and the dead.” This world’s system of injustice and unbelief is not endless. He will appear to be known by all people and he will make the world right and whole.

This will be his final and ultimate glory on earth – exceeding the glory of his resurrection and ascension, witnessed by some, and his session, hidden from our sight. He will return with power and great glory. As Paul writes, “Every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father!”

Witnesses

So what does all this mean to us? We come back to what Jesus said to his disciples just before he ascended: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea-Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth.” Ten days later the Holy Spirit would come, and we will talk about him when we pick up our studies in the Apostles’ Creed in a few weeks. Meanwhile, we realize that this mission gives our life meaning. We who remain on earth, as long as we remain, are witnesses to Jesus Christ wherever we are.

This is a powerful motivational text for cross cultural missions, but that’s not all. It’s actually not in the form of a command. It’s a promise, and this promise of empowerment has been extended throughout almost two thousand years. The fact that we, Corinth Church, are here in this town bearing witness to Jesus is because...

He ascended. He is no longer physically on earth, but he is everywhere by his Spirit and everywhere there are believers. Because he ascended, we are his hands, his ears, his feet, his mouth, his heart loving on a world so desperately in need of him.

He sits at God’s right hand. When you think to yourself, “I’m not a very effective witness,” remember he intercedes for you. When you become discouraged, remember he’s empowering you. When you get too comfortable with your progress, remember to keep setting your mind above, where Jesus sits at God’s right hand. He may be out of your sight, but you are never out of his mind. He’s with you, he’s for you.

He’s coming again to judge. The time is short and getting shorter. We need to get this Good News of Jesus to as many people as we can in as many ways as we can. We don’t want his judgment to fall on anyone. The glory of Jesus will be complete when every person everywhere has the opportunity to believe. Amen.