

Saint Peter Lutheran Church
May 21, 2020 • Ascension
Service and Sermon notes
Pastor Jack Kelly

Theme

Forty days after his resurrection Jesus Christ ascended into heaven. Since the early centuries of the early Christian church this event has been celebrated with enthusiasm and triumphant joy. Knowing that Jesus Christ is in heaven, we are assured of his absolute authority and control over all things. Trusting in his undeserved love for us, we are comforted that he always uses his almighty power to bring us good.

Prayer of the Day

Lord Jesus, King of glory, on this day you ascended far above the heavens and at God's right hand you rule the nations. Leave us not alone, we pray, but grant the spirit of truth that at your command and by your power we may be your witnesses in all the world; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

First Lesson: Acts 1:1-11

Luke transitions from the account of Jesus' life to the story of the early Church. The pivotal moment is when Jesus ascended into heaven. From that moment disciples became witness to the ends of the earth.

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 47 (Call to worship)

Great joy comes to God's people because the Lord God ascends and reigns over all the earth.

Second Lesson: Ephesians 1:16-23

Paul thanks God for the Ephesians, and he prays that they would better know their hope and God's power. Christ's ascension shows God power and the kingship of Christ over all things, especially the Church.

Gospel: Luke 24:44-53

The end of Luke's Gospel shows us Jesus interpreting the past ("he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures"), predicting the future ("repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached"), and ascending ("taken up into heaven").

Sermon Text: Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Sermon summary:

In 1920, exactly 100 years ago our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was in its glory years, led by a team of three talented scholars. For over a dozen years they had been teaching and publishing rich Biblical theology with amazing clarity and warm evangelical tone. Then it happened. Professor John Schaller, the president and unifying force of the faculty unexpectedly died. He was only 60 years old. The post-war flu we call "the Spanish flu" needed only 36 hours to snuff out Schaller's life. Doesn't that sound eerily similar to what is happening right now?

In a flash the direction of our seminary and synod became uncertain. In the next decade a rift would develop between faculty members and even across our synod. This became known as the Protes'tant Controversy. If you were to study the events of that controversy you might ask questions: "why would a loving and almighty Savior let that happen to his Church? Is Jesus really in control of all things if disasters life this happen?" My point in telling this story is to remind you that history repeats itself. You might be asking the same kinds of questions about what's happening in 2020. None of what is happening today gives me a warm, fuzzy feeling about Jesus' ability to control all things.

If you had concern about how things are going to turn out this summer and beyond then you should be very happy that it is Ascension Day. Tonight, on the celebration our Lord's ascension into heaven we consider the seventh time Jesus spoke after he rose from the dead: "All authority has been given to me." With these words Jesus, the Victor, gives you, and all of us...

Victory Over Everything!

1. The greatest power veiled in weakness

It's one of the first Bible passages we learn—the Great Commission: *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.* This sounds like it is about evangelism, but it has more to do with power and authority. Right before the Great Commission we hear: *Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*

What is the greatest power on earth? Is it the military of a super-power nation? No, that military doesn't have the power to free people from things like depression and substance abuse. Is ultra-modern science and medicine the greatest power on earth? Obviously no. Disease, infections, and death will be with us until the end of time. And all the other powerful things like media influence, billionaires, and social media are weaker than we might think.

The greatest power on earth is the power to forgive sin. Kings, countries, and world powers long to be able to free themselves of guilt, but they are feeble and

powerless to handle guilt and shame. Wealthy try to forget sin through treasures; artists use their art, intelligent people use rationalization; all of it fails to free the conscience. The power to forgive sin is exclusively given to God's Son and those who are sent out by the Son. We heard Pastor Heise speak about this last Sunday. We have been given the authority to forgive sin in the name of Jesus Christ. Luther talked about how great this power is: "We also are lords and kings and have the greatest power [to forgive sin]."

But look at the way Jesus gave this power and you certainly wonder. Jesus hands this power to 11 men with no money, no weapons, no assistants, and not even knowledge of foreign languages. On top of that, this is a band of constant doubters. But here is Christ's Church—built on 11 frail men who are to rule in spite of the fact that they have nothing to do with money, possessions, sword, and force. No, the wealthy and powerful of the world handle those flimsy things. "Our rule is over another concern—sin. Luther said, "We are lords and kings, but this great power extends no farther than our sin."

We have been given the greatest power there is in having the authority to forgive sin in the name of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus. Yet this power is veiled in Jesus' apparent weakness and our very real weakness. People won't normally see power, authority, or victory when they see us Christians.

2. Everything means everything

So let's be sharp on this truth. You are indeed winners—perfect, all-conquering champions. But you are only winners in the name of and through the work of Jesus Christ. Life will have plenty of ups and downs, apparent losses and wins. But Jesus' perfect life and sacrificial death make you winners. His resurrection guarantees it. His words from the Great Commission now tell you the full extent of His authority and your victory.

In the words of the Great Commission there are four "all's," and they are worthy of our attention. "All power, all nations, all commands, all the days." The first "all,"—Jesus says that he has *all power*. Literally Jesus claims to have authority and control over everything. All forces of nature, all angels and demons, all powerful people on earth...everybody and everything. And Jesus shares everything he has with us. That means that you, in effect have authority over those things. Which means that you are a winner over all who oppose you or try to oppress you. Your enemies just don't know it yet. Whatever influence they have it will be temporary; whatever Jesus lets them do it will serve your good. So don't get alarmed by rumors of one-world governments or conspiracy theories. None of them can separate you from the love of God. (Rom 8:28)

The second "all" in the Great Commission is *all nations*. Jesus has something for you to deliver and he

is not at all particular about who is to receive that delivery. The faith that you have is given for you to share with everybody. That means that it doesn't matter whether your chem-lab partner is Buddhist, your fishing buddy is atheist, or your fellow quilter is a Mormon. How can this be? Whether people know Christ or not, whether they believe it or not, they are already under the power of Christ. They are already caught in the net that he will draw up out of the river of history when he returns. All nations are Christ's and bound up for him to deal with. You can and need to share your faith with them. Jesus is not a "live and let live" kind of lord. He is a jealous God who wants the hearts of all nations. He shares that driving, winning purpose with you.

The third "all" of the Great Commission is teaching them to obey *everything* I have commanded you. Wouldn't it be terrible if Jesus told us to make disciples without giving us tools to do the job? What if you had to make up your own plan of salvation and it had to work? Praise God we don't have to do that! God made the plan, Jesus worked the plan, and his Word reliably shares the plan. Christ's Word is clear and simple. We are sinners—that's what is wrong with us and our world. Jesus is perfect and lived that way always. Jesus trades his perfection for our sinfulness when he died on the cross. He has won forgiveness and pardon for all nations. So the tools he gives us are powerful and effective and fully true. God's Word and Baptism have the power to deliver salvation. And so we use them together always. Baptism always with instruction. Instruction always with Baptism. These tools always bring Christ's deeds to us, never our deeds to Christ.

The fourth "all" is for "all days." It is an all that has a limit to it. There will come a time when days will cease. When the Savior returns to end time and begin eternity he will be present face-to-face as he was with the disciples. Maybe you envy the disciples, but we really shouldn't. Jesus promises that he is present with us even though he ascended into heaven. He will never leave us no matter how dark and perilous the times get. He will always be with us even when we feel all hope is lost.

Sad and terrible things happen to God's Church. Important teachers and leaders like John Schaller die early. Controversies divide congregations, schools, and synods. Pandemics totally interrupt our worship, school, and fellowship. Tragic accidents and heated arguments disrupt the gracious tranquility we expect to see in God house. Let none of those things shake your certainty in Christ. He ascended into heaven and is seated at God's right hand in absolute authority and power. He is victorious in every way and every thing. And when he promises to be with you always, it means that he shares His victory with you. You win over everything because Jesus reigns over everything. Let that truth sink in, and live each day with Christian confidence and boldness. Amen.