

Celebrating Ascension  
June 2, 2019

Text: Ephesians 1:15-23

Theme: “Now and Then”

“Now and then,” means occasionally, not that often. There is probably no regular pattern, at least not one we have detected. Maybe that is often enough, or maybe even now and then is too often. It could be we don’t give too much thought to the now then as we are very caught up in the now.

Today we consider a little the now and the then. We are living the now and we do so in hope of the then. We experience much good in the now, but not all good, the then will bring better. A pregnant woman is with child now, but waiting in joyful expectation to the then, holding that child in her arms. We are sick now, but looking forward to the then of being better. We are short now, but looking forward to the then when we grow. Maybe that wait is over.

The Ascension of our Lord is about the now and the then. We are in the now, well, now, and we live the now in the great hope of then, the consummation of all things. We are here for our Lord has work for us to do. We have a divine purpose. On Ascension we remember our Lord Jesus has ascended to the Father’s right hand. He’s there even now interceding for us. The then is in the future, yet bits of the blessings break into the now. This makes even now a wow!

Yes, we are in the now. The now has good and bad. Today is the seventh of the seven Sundays of Easter. This Sunday is actually that in-between Sunday, that Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost. Today we remember Ascension. Christ is risen, still risen indeed. This is always true whether we are in the Easter season or not. It is a time of joy:

Had Christ, who once was slain,  
Not burst His three-day prison,  
Our faith had been in vain:  
But now has Christ arisen,  
arisen, arisen;  
But now has Christ arisen! (482, This Joyful Eastertide, stanza 1)

Sin, death, and the devil have been defeated. We have life forever and the life now, full life now. The devil still roars, but we can resist him. We have the full armor of God who has defeated him. We go about our vocations in life, and we have more than one probably, stations in life such as husband, wife, father, mother, judge, production worker, service worker, teacher, student, pastor, etc. We do so walking by the light of our Lord serving one another, serving our neighbor as a reflection of the service of Christ. This is life in the now, often the same things as a lot of other people, but as new creations in Christ. It is a gift to life in the now as God's child.

The apostles had been living life in the now of the days of the resurrected Jesus. Joy had come on the third day and remained throughout 40 days. “[Jesus] presented Himself alive by many proofs appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). Maybe these were days of present surprise. They would be going about other things, like fishing, and suddenly there was Jesus. Were these days of anticipation? Was the consummation of all things upon them? “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6)?” There was that little matter of repentance and forgiveness being proclaimed to all nations (Luke 24:47). Yet they must have longed for the glories spoken of by the prophets in the then to be in their now. Surely the One who had conquered death had the power to bring it about.

But suddenly He would be gone. It's the 40<sup>th</sup> day after the 3<sup>rd</sup> day. Jesus and His apostles go downhill on the east side of Jerusalem and go up the hill toward Bethany. Jesus just keeps on going—up. He's lifted up, hidden by the clouds, and they just keep looking

up. 'Why are you standing here looking? This Jesus taken up will come back in the same way (Acts 1:11).' Now it was time to go about the work He had given them to do. The first part of that to wait for the Holy Spirit, that power that would equip them for the rest of the work. And they go about it. That's what the rest of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles is about.

Now we are in the last days, been in those ever since our Lord's Ascension. We are in that time of birth pangs. Those difficulties that Jesus spoke of happening, some of them in reaction to faithfulness to Him, have been and are happening. We see it with the apostles as they go about preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins. But there are those other difficulties of life happening, difficulties that are always making their unwelcome entrance into the now. We wish they would wait until the then, or better yet, never.

So we are still here in the now. Jesus has not made that return the angels spoke of as of yet. The then has not broken in and swallowed up the now. There is still work to be done. We have the news to share that the kingdom has come and of the coming kingdom. You and I, brother and sister in Christ, are royal servants of the King. The devil is just as opposed to the spread of the news now just as much as he was back then. But our Lord is still as victorious.

Difficulties do still pop into the now. It goes back to the then, the way back then. They have been happening since that first bit of poison, the eye-opening taste of rebellion and death. That was the beginning of navel gazing. And if Adam and Eve didn't have navels it doesn't change the fact of self-absorption. It's about me. This is why Jesus faced such opposition from those who were afraid of losing their positions. This is why there was such hopeful anticipation on the part of His followers and struggling for position. This is why there were so devastated when the one whom they thought would redeem Israel

was dead and buried. And it's still true. In the now the old nature wants to keep us in the me mode.

But there is the then, the glorious then. God will dwell with His people. Here in this new Jerusalem, the new heavens and the new earth, are those streets of gold, those gates of pearl. Here the River of Life flows through with the tree of life growing on the banks. Here will be the sound of constant praise, no moaning or groaning, no sorrow. We will be in God's presence directly, brightness that we cannot imagine, but no sunglasses will be needed. The then will be the days when the eye of the heart have given place to face to face. This all begins when Jesus returns in the way He had gone, visibly, but on the return for all to see. The beginning of that then will be absolute joy for those who have longed for His coming and absolute horror for those who assumed it would never come.

Here, let me give you an object to visualize the then. I know these three pieces of painted PVC with valves don't look like much, but maybe imagine them to be the Father, Son, and Spirit. They are joined together in this fitting, maybe we can think of the power of the Godhead flowing through each person and out to do His work. We won't dwell on it too much. There is always a fine line between presenting analogies and tipping into heresy.

But here we are in the now. It's just this simple fitting. Does it seem small, insignificant, or helpless? And look there is this separation between the now and the then. Does the then matter for the now?

Well, it does matter. The then changes the now. Christ has redeemed the now, whether the now was 2000 years ago, today, or 1500 years in the future. The now certainly needed redeeming. We needed redeeming. Paul writes here in Ephesians that we were strangers and aliens to the promises of the covenant (2:12, 19). We were without hope and

without God (2:12). As a result, we were dead in our trespasses and sins (2:1, 5). There was no being up on a pedestal no matter how short it may have been.

But we were not insignificant. We were always objects of God's love. This is why the promises were made and this is why the promises are fulfilled. Our salvation has always been God's plan. Evil men or the evil one could never stop it. Actually even as evil worked for evil, God was weaving into His plan to bring about His good. God does it all in His time. So the Son comes in that fullness of time, the perfect Son. He leads the perfect life, and offers Himself as the perfect sacrifice all in perfect faithfulness. He was made sin for us at the cross that we might be the righteousness of God. We do see the power of God in raising Him from the dead.

Paul tells us that same power is at work for us. In Jesus we who were dead have been made alive. We are connected to Him, to His death and to His life in being baptized into Him. The Spirit is the One who has opened the eyes of our heart that we may know this and cling to it. We have been raised up with Jesus, and Paul tells there is more even in the now. We are "seated with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus (2:6)." We are His body, you know, even with the now seems much less than regal.

Part of the then comes to us now. There's a term for that, "prolepsis." I read a quote from a theologian named Kirk Wegter-McNelly. It is taken from a chapel sermon delivered at the Boston University School of Theology. I think he may be associated with the Reformed Church in America. It explains the term well. "God is the one who transforms our present and redefines our past, both from the future and as the future. There is a word theologians use to name this power. That word is "prolepsis." In the Greek it simply means to anticipate or take beforehand, but over the history of Christian thought it has come to mean the manifestation of God's future for all creation through a concrete, specific pre-actualization of that future in the now."

Such a now is a real wow! There is a connection. Blessings of the then come into the now, just not the full experience. Yes, the power that raised Christ from the dead, “the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe,” is at work to bring us to faith and to strengthen us in that faith. The Spirit is at work to give our spirits wisdom, revelation, and knowledge. The Spirit is at work in God’s Word to do this. In baptism and the Lord’s Supper God is piping His forgiveness to us. As we are gathered as God’s people in the name of our Lord, God comes to be with us not to destroy, but to feed. It’s a little bit of the then now.

God supplied constant, more than sufficient grace. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this not of yourselves. It is the gift of God so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8, 9). There is great work to do. “We are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which He prepared beforehand for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10). These works serve our neighbor and honor God. The Church still has the commission to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins until our Lord returns.

We wait for the then, but in Christ we are fully heirs of salvation right now. We have the gifts of the Bestower’s care, blessing, and direction. The Holy Spirit has been given as the guarantee of the receiving of the full inheritance (Ephesians 1:14). Our Lord has ascended to the right hand of the Father to work all things for the good of those who loved Him, those called according to His purpose, the church. Now and then, the blessing of the then even now. It happens not just now and then, but continually through God’s Word’s and Sacraments. For Jesus’ sake. Amen