



**A Sermon preached in Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Michigan  
by The Reverend Andrew Van Culin, *Rector***

**Homecoming Sunday  
(Observing the Feast of the Ascension)  
11 September 2022**

*In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

*I am sending upon you what my Father promised. (Luke 24:51)*

For the past several years, as we have come together on Homecoming Sunday, we have returned to the Mount of Olives, so to speak, to hear again the story of Jesus' great Ascension. For while many Episcopal churches are named in honor of a beloved and respected saint and so has a traditional "Patronal Feast", we are named in honor of our Lord himself, and so we mark our naming with a remembrance of his Ascension – which we might liken to his enthronement.

There, before his beloved disciples, the very ones who had questioned the wisdom of his teaching and abandoned his way in the face of his death, Jesus their crucified teacher, Lord, and friends, departs them to take his seat beside God the Father. There, atop the Mount of Olives where they had witnessed his arrested and abandoned him to his death, they now behold his glory.

And yet, in this moment of awe and wonder, Jesus asks nothing of them who gather with him, not even their praise or love. Rather, in this moment of revelation Jesus pronounces again God's promise:

*I am sending upon you what my Father promised.*

Now, when the betrayed one might naturally desire restoration through confession or a renewed proclamation of love and fidelity, Jesus himself remains faithful to his way – ever loving first and ever loving all.



And so, as Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified one, is revealed as none other than Christ the King, he makes a final promise to his people, a three-fold promise, in fact.

The first promise, of course, is the promise of the Spirit. The abandoned one, the one who had cried out “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani” at his utter abandonment upon the cross, promises never to abandon the very ones who had left his side in his moment of terror and great suffering. He promises, with God the Father who blesses us at our birthing, to never depart us be it in our moment of great sin and unlovingness, or in the moment of our death and greatest weakness. No, the Spirit, the very and eternal presence of God, is promised to be with us as our constant advocate and guide.

And so we celebrate this first great promise, every year at Pentecost, as we come together with red dresses and red ties, and a few pairs of red slacks (I’m thinking of you John Woodhouse!), to mark that joyous awakening to God’s presence not just about us in the wonder of creation or the transcendence of the temple, but *within* us, as our companion and guide.

But the Spirit is not the only promise of this great encounter.

*Lifting up his hands, he blessed them.*

There, with this simple act of blessing – the mysterious and wondrous act of friendship and affection, the cherished gift of reconciliation and love is proclaimed again. There are no words of confession proclaimed by the disciples gathered, they neither cower nor grovel in their sin, perhaps they have done all that they can just to come, to face again their Lord whom they had betrayed and abandoned. There in that moment, with the simple lifting of his hand, Jesus reminds them of what is and always was and always will be true: God’s eternal love for them.

This, in many ways, is the great story of the cross itself – and the great wisdom of Saint Paul who so beautifully proclaims, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This is the second great promise. That God’s love endures.

*And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.*



Now, these were not Jesus words, but they point to what I believe is the third great promise of Christ – that we may have completeness of joy. Some may recall the words of Jesus from his last supper with his disciples, as he washes their feet and breaks bread with them one final time. There, in the midst of his long discourse on love, in which we places before them a new commandment to love one another as he has loved them – with service and forgiveness and endurance – he wraps the entirety of his message and mandate in joy:

*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

This is Jesus hope and promise – that the way of sacrificial, forgiving, eternal Love – will lead to a fulfillment of joy. It is the promise that this way of living, in contrast to all the promises of joy emanating from the world – will be a true and fulfilling joy. And I cannot emphasize enough, the importance of *this third promise*.

We often think that God's greatest promise is that of life eternal – and it is a great promise indeed. But the fulfillment of that great promise is entirely in God's hands – we have nothing to do with earning God's grace – just as the disciples had nothing to do with receiving Jesus final blessing here. Life and life eternal is God's act of love to humanity.

But this fulfillment of this third promise resides in our hands. As we learn to love, as we learn to sacrifice and serve, as we learn to endure and to forgive one another and our neighbor – we will encounter the very joy that Jesus has always known. This is Jesus' promise, but its fulfillment rests in our hands and the choices of our lives.

And that is where we come in and where we come together. We celebrate this wonderful day of Homecoming – and this wonderful community of Christ Church – because we, here, together, are committed to learning and living this love and joy together. The joy of Jesus is unlike any other joy of the world – and unlike the multitude of joys that the world promises – this joy is a joy available to all people all the time.

If we but change our heart and life with love.