

## **Between Heaven and Earth: Waiting for Holy Fire**

**Ascension Sunday Sermon, Text: Epistle to the Ephesians 1:15–23**

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There are moments in the Christian story that feel unfinished.

Christmas gives us a child. Good Friday gives us a cross. Easter gives us an empty tomb.

Ascension gives us... absence.

Jesus is lifted up. The disciples are left behind. And Pentecost has not yet come.

So the church stands between heaven and earth. Waiting. Praying. Wondering.

What now?

Perhaps Ascension Sunday is one of the most honest moments in the Christian calendar because it mirrors our own spiritual condition. We believe Christ is risen and exalted, but we still live among grief, injustice, division, and unanswered prayers. We hear Paul describe the church in magnificent language—“the fullness of him who fills all in all”—and yet many of us know churches that feel fragile, ordinary, even disappointing. There is a gap between what is said and what we see.

How do we hold together Paul’s exalted vision and our lived reality?

Paul writes as though the church shines with divine glory. But we know churches that argue over human sexuality and political endorsement for war crimes. Churches that hurt people. Churches that remained silent during slavery. Churches that blessed conquest and exclusion.

And still Paul dares to speak of the church as Christ’s body.

Why?

That tension sits at the heart of Ascension Sunday. So this morning, I want us to reflect on three movements in this text as we wait for Holy Fire.

### **1. The Cross Reveals Where God Chooses to Stand**

Paul says that God raised Christ “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.” Yet before Christ ascended, he descended into suffering.

And that matters.

The cross was not a beautiful religious ornament in the first century. It was an instrument of humiliation. It was a Roman lynching tree. It was a public declaration that someone was disposable.

The powerful were not crucified. The privileged were not crucified. Only the marginalized were nailed to crosses.

So when Christians proclaim that God was crucified, it becomes a scandal. It raises unsettling questions. What kind of God suffers? What kind of Messiah is executed? What kind of victory looks like defeat?

Many interpretations of the cross move quickly to atonement, quickly to triumph, quickly to resurrection. But if we rush too fast, we miss the horror of the moment.

The disciples did not stand beneath the cross singing victory songs. They stood there, shattered.

And perhaps that is where many people still stand today. Some are crucified by racism. Some by poverty. Some were rejected because of their sexuality, political affiliation, and ethnic, caste, religious, and class identities. Some by loneliness. Some by systems that crush human dignity, quietly and efficiently.

And for them, suffering is not abstract theology. It is daily life. Suffering is a reality for them. So what does the cross mean there? The power of the cross is not that suffering itself becomes holy. There is nothing redemptive about oppression. God does not glorify violence. The power of the cross is that Christ chose solidarity.

Jesus went where the abandoned are. He entered the place of shame. He stood among the condemned.

And because of that, the cross becomes the place where oppressed people discover they are not alone.

Pause there for a moment.

What if the greatest revelation of God is not domination but companionship?

What if divine power is revealed not in avoiding wounds, but in entering them?

Ascension Sunday does not erase the cross. The risen Christ still carries scars into glory.

And that means heaven itself remembers suffering.

## **2. The Church Completes Christ by Learning Christ**

Now here comes the difficult part of Paul's vision. Paul says the church is Christ's body, "the fullness of him who fills all in all." Honestly, that sounds almost impossible to believe at times.

Can an imperfect church, as it has always in history, really reveal Christ?

History gives us reasons to hesitate. The church has often failed. Many times, it failed deeply. Yet Paul still speaks with astonishing hope.

Why?

Because the church's calling is not perfection, but the church's calling is pursuit of perfection.

Listen carefully to Paul's prayer. He prays that believers may receive "a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him better."

That changes everything.

The church does not complete Christ because it always gets history right. The church completes Christ when it continues seeking Christ.

Every act of repentance matters. Every attempt to love more truthfully matters, and every effort to see Christ more clearly matters.

Sometimes God works not through institutional greatness, but through ordinary faithfulness.

A hospital chaplain sits quietly beside a dying patient. A congregation preparing meals for grieving families. A pastor answering a late-night phone call. A child lighting a candle during prayer. A church learning, however slowly, to welcome those once excluded.

These moments rarely look spectacular. And yet perhaps this is exactly how Christ fills the world.

Not always through grand triumphs. But through flickers of holy presence.

Have you noticed that Pentecost begins not in a palace, but in an upstairs room?

The fire comes to the waiting people. Ordinary people. And maybe that is the miracle.

Not that the church is flawless, but that God still chooses to dwell within fragile human communities. The church becomes Christ's body not because it possesses him completely, but because it keeps opening itself to him.

### **3. Ascension Teaches Us to Live Toward What We Cannot Yet See**

Ascension creates a strange space.

Christ is gone. The Spirit has not yet arrived. The disciples are suspended between memory and promise.

And perhaps that is where many of us live.

We know enough to hope. But not enough to see clearly.

Paul prays that “the eyes of your heart” may be enlightened. Not merely the eyes of reason. But the eyes of the heart. Because some truths can only be lived before they are fully understood.

Hebrews says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

The church lives in that tension.

We proclaim resurrection in a wounded world. We proclaim unity in a divided world. We proclaim hope while standing beside graves.

Why continue?

Because Ascension reminds us that Christ’s story did not end at the cross.

Rome believed crucifixion silenced people. But resurrection exposed the limits of imperial power.

And Pentecost will reveal something even more astonishing: the Spirit will descend upon ordinary people and continue Christ’s ministry through them.

That is the mystery Paul sees. The church becomes the place where Christ’s life continues moving through history. Imperfectly. Sometimes painfully. But truly.

So perhaps the question for Ascension Sunday is not whether the church has failed at times. It has.

The deeper question is this: Will we still wait for Holy Fire?

Will we still believe God can breathe through tired communities?

Will we still trust that resurrection can emerge from places marked by failure?

Will we still open ourselves to mysteries larger than our own understanding?

Because the disciples who stood gazing into heaven could not yet imagine what was coming.

Tongues of fire. New languages. Broken barriers. Fear transformed into courage. But first, they had to wait. Wait between heaven and earth, between promise and fulfilment, and between the wounded cross and the coming fire.

And perhaps that is where we are today. Waiting not passively, but hopefully. Listening for the Spirit. Learning Christ again, and through trusting that even now, in ordinary moments, God is preparing holy fire. Amen.