

“The Jesus Who Does Not Belong”

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

May 9, 2010

Ephesians 1:15–23

Luke 24:44–53

Every so often, I’ll find in my conversations with you from this pulpit that a theme will come together that I hadn’t planned.

This is different, of course, from what happens when I preach a sermon series around a central theme or a core passage of scripture. There, the theme is planned.

But now and then, I’ll discover after the fact or mid-stream that there is a theme I hadn’t planned, one rising from the soil of God’s Word like a daffodil in Spring: sudden, welcome, but in my case unexpected, for I am no gardener. Suddenly, it seems, I’ll notice the connections, the ways in which these different conversations belong to each other.

In my last few sermons, I talked about belonging. It wasn’t about belonging to a club, or to a church, or to a neighborhood, or to a nation that was my focus. Anticipating today, Mother’s Day, I could have talked about belonging to our mothers — which we surely do — but, no, I didn’t have this as my focus, either. What I had in mind, and I hoped you heard, was this important truth for Christians: we belong to Jesus.

So, two weeks ago I said that the essential definition of a Christian is to belong to Jesus. If we are Christians, then we are his possession, his subjects, his servants, and in this belonging we find freedom and peace.

And last week I talked about what it *means*, practically speaking, to belong to Jesus, and I said that, at the very least, others should be able to tell in how we love one another that we belong to him.

We belong to Jesus. Because of this, in a sense both limited and derived, we belong to each other. Because of this, we no longer belong to ourselves. We belong to Jesus.

Today’s scripture passages take us even deeper into this notion of belonging. But they do so with a twist.

They all speak about Jesus, obviously. And what they direct our attention toward is the ascension of Jesus. The ascension is what we find in two of these passages, the one from Luke and the one from Acts. In each of them we hear recounted what the disciples saw: Jesus, having been raised from the dead, now is removed from their presence, slipping not accidentally but intentionally from this place to the next, moving away from them in a way that they could only describe as “ascending” from earth to heaven.

What did this all mean? What were they to think? How were they to put their minds around it?

Well, we know that they did not take this as a *bad* thing. For them, the ascension did not represent loss; it meant gain. For them, the point was not that Jesus was no longer *here*; rather, it was that Jesus was now *there*. They knew that his ascension did not mean their abandonment but his glorification.

We know that, for the disciples, the ascension of Jesus was a joyful thing. And we know this because of what it says at the end of the passage from Luke. Did you notice it? It says there, not that they were sorrowful, not that they went back to their homes in despair. No, it says that they “returned to Jerusalem *with great joy.*”

For they saw this departure of Jesus as showing them who Jesus truly was: the Lord, the Son of God, the one whose purpose is not confined to earth nor whose destiny is kept within time. They saw him, truly, as the one who is above the earthbound and the temporal, not because he is alien to these but rather because he *rules* these. They rejoiced, the disciples, because they were shown and now were beginning to understand this happy truth: that although they belonged to Jesus, *Jesus did not belong to them.*

That glorious, joyful reality about Jesus is what we hear proclaimed in the passage I read from Ephesians. There it says that God raised Jesus from the dead and placed him (hear it again, now)

*far above all rule and authority and power and dominion,
and above every name that is named,
not only in this age but also in the age to come.
And [God] has put all things under [Christ's] feet
and has made him the head over all things. . . .*

“All things.” Jesus is *far above* all things.

He is *over* all things.

Every power, every dominion, every nation, every ideology: these are *lower* than Jesus. Jesus is *superior* to them. Jesus rules them, whether they know it or not, whether they accept it or not.

Jesus has ascended. God the Father not only caused him to rise from death; God also lifted Jesus back to his rightful place, that place *above*:

all nations,
all ideologies,
all theories,
all people,
all families —

above them all, to that place of loving power and powerful love that rightly belongs to him and can belong to no other.

And so that's why I say that, for the disciples, although they belonged to Jesus, Jesus did not belong to them.

The same is true for us. We belong to Jesus, but Jesus does not belong to us. We might want to make these matters nice and symmetrical. We might want to have these two sides logically balance out: we belong, and so Jesus belongs.

But that is not how it works. That is not the logic of heaven. The ascension is God's declaration, bluntly yet joyously, that Jesus does *not* belong. He is not our possession. He is not our property. He is not a value alongside other values we hold. He is not part of a series we can count, and which we count as our own. He is not a support for our way of life, a crutch for our biases, a rationalization of our prejudices.

Again, Jesus is *above*:

all nations (even our own),

all ideologies (even the ones we find too obvious to question),

all theories (even the ones we prefer),

all people (even the ones we most admire),

all families (even the one to which we were born or into which we were adopted).

Jesus is above all these, all that we hold dear and privileged and special and beyond criticism. He does not belong to them, and he does not belong to us.

We might try to put him into the service of our way of life.

We might try to enlist him for our causes.

We might try to use his message of grace to excuse all too easily and comfortably our failures.

We might try to deploy his message of holiness to justify our suspicions and enmities of others.

We might try to turn him into the perfect model of all that we already hold dear: the ideal capitalist, the supreme patron of the arts, the original American, the great family man.

But try as we might, we will fail. For Christ does not belong to us, and he does not belong to this world. Rather, he is above all these. He rules nations and individuals, movements and ideologies, theories and world-views. He belongs to none of them, and can never be brought under their dominion. And those that attempt to do so eventually are shown to have co-opted not Christ but merely a caricature.

To all of this, I believe the appropriate answer is, quite simply, "Thank God."

That's right. "Thank God." For since Christ rules all — nations, ideologies, theories, people, families — then, if we belong to him, these can have no final authority over us. They do not ultimately control our destiny. They can not, finally, say to us (nor do we have to pay them any heed if they should try) that we are under their thumb, that the meaning of life and our meaning, too, is found in them, that we should praise them or fear them as we would a god. For they are not God, they are not holy, they do not have the first or last word about us or anything else.

No, the ascension of Jesus tells us that when we belong to him, we are freed from their tyranny. We can live in the knowledge that we belong to the one who does not belong to them. In our submission to him, we are liberated from them. We are given the freedom to take part in them without giving over to them our souls, for those belong to Jesus, and he belongs to no other. And to all this we can, and may, give a sincere "Thank God." Thank God, that we belong to Jesus, who does not belong to us.

So I ask you to strive this week to live as those who belong to Jesus. And what I mean by that is this:

to put aside your tendency to treat Christ as your possession;
to lay aside your fear of those that are lower than Christ;
to live as *Christ's* possession, his precious servant,

one whom he loves and redeems and heals and lifts up,
one whom he welcomes home and causes to belong.

Seek to live this way, knowing that Jesus has made it possible.
For Jesus does not belong to us. Rather, we belong to Jesus.