

Ascending on High

Last Sunday we celebrated the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Charles Jefferson insisted again and again that the message of Christ crucified was the central theme of the New Testament. He declared, *"Christianity has prospered only to the proportion that it has kept the cross at the forefront of all its preaching. Every now and then a denomination has started, determined to get rid of the Cross of Jesus, or at least to pay scant attention to it, and in every case these denominations have been found at the end of the third or fourth generation either decaying or dead. There is no interpretation of the Christian religion that can have in it redeeming power, which ignores or belittles the death of Christ."*

If the Cross of Jesus Christ is the central pillar of Christianity, then the resurrection is the solid foundation which holds it up. But you can't go to the cross without going through the cross and seeing a risen Christ. The death and resurrection should always lead us to the ascension. To God the ascension signifies completion. Christ's work was finished, **"When He by Himself purged our sins and then sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high"** (Hebrews 1:3, 4). Therefore, the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ need to be dealt as one subject.

There are too many "Good Friday Christians" who are stuck at the cross suffering with Christ over and over again. But this is only a part of the Christian experience. Good Friday is primarily for the sinner (the unsaved / the world at large). There are millions of people out there who need sanctification - which is purification from the guilt and power of sin. But we as believers go to the cross to identify with the death AND resurrection of our Lord. **Luke 24:6, "He is not here, He has risen!" Acts 1:3** tells us that **"Jesus presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs."** Jesus knew that He would have to provide infallible proof of His resurrection, and this He did! Every man, woman and child, whether Christian or not, don't have a problem accepting the fact the Jesus was crucified. It's the resurrection and ascension that is always controversial.

In the 19th century and right up to the last war, cynical scholars (mainly German) sought to discredit the story of Jesus, the Gospels which tell it, and specifically His death and resurrection. However today, the march of historical research has served to demolish all anti-Christian theories. At the beginning of this century, many learned scholars, professors and intellectuals confidently predicted that Christianity would not survive to the year 2000. But here we are, seven years beyond the millennium, and there are more Christians living on earth than ever before (some 2 billion of us). All those modern philosophies, creeds and superstitions, which were thought to replace Jesus Christ in our hearts and minds, are dead or dying. They have been tested to destruction and were found wanting. Now, more than ever, the existence of Jesus Christ and His ministry are regarded as one of the best-authenticated events in the whole of antiquity.

To us, Jesus is the most important man who ever lived, and His resurrection is the bedrock of our faith. **"God raised Him up on the third day, and showed Him openly" (Acts 10:40)**. If God did not provide us with infallible proof that Jesus rose to live again, then our salvation would be impossible to grasp. This I believe is why Jesus appeared to so many people after His resurrection. By clearly and concisely recording the numerous resurrection appearances of Jesus, the New Testament leaves us with no doubt about the authenticity of this event.

When Paul was writing to the Corinthians about the resurrection, he tells them that there were more than 250 persons still living who had seen Jesus on one occasion after His rising from the dead. **1 Corinthians 15:6**

states, "**He (Jesus) appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.**" This statement by Paul was a direct challenge to the cynical Greek scholars to check out his facts for themselves. He was saying to them, "*Why not pay a visit to those whom are still alive and cross-examine them for yourselves, if you wish?*"

Paul's opening argument was also very convincing, "**For what I received I pass on to you as of primary importance; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Peter and then to the twelve**" (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Prophecy fulfilled!

When Luke wrote the **Book of Acts**, he provoked a new reality and this involved the vision of a Christ who was raised from the dead and then *ascended to rule and reign forever*. Death, the "ultimate ending," the master fact which determines most of our horizons, our values and our perspectives on life, has been brought to an end in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection, followed by the ascension, has empowered the church to continue in the same manner and ministry as Christ Himself fulfilled. We should not only "*know*" Christ, but we should "*know the power of His resurrection!*"

In the opening verses in **Acts**, Luke manages to rebuke any church which is wistfully longing for some departed leader - as if the church were a mere memorial in society to a dead Jesus. **Jesus has risen**, and **He is alive!** Furthermore, the same force that empowered Jesus is present in His church today. So consider this, the resurrection power of Jesus was released to the church the moment Jesus sat down at the right hand of God. It was Christ's ascension that brought about the empowerment of the church - the Holy Spirit's power!

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes into your life. You will tell about Me in the city of Jerusalem and over all the countries of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." **When Jesus had said this and while they were still looking at Him, He was taken up. A cloud carried Him away so they could not see Him. They were still looking up to heaven, watching Him go. All at once two men dressed in white stood beside them. They said, "You men of the country of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This same Jesus Who was taken from you into heaven will return in the same way you saw Him go up into heaven"** (Acts 1:8-10).

Jesus ascended in order to one day descend in the same fashion. **1 Thessalonians 4: 16,17** says, "**For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.**" O, what a day that's going to be!

Christ's work on the cross (represented by Good Friday) secured our sanctification and made salvation possible, and the resurrection (celebrated on Easter Sunday) provided infallible proof that Jesus is still alive today. However, it was Christ's ascension that has supplied the church with *power from on high* (through the Person of the Holy Spirit). Spiritual power was released to equip you and me for ministry and for every good work.

You may be highly talented, intensively trained, and widely experienced, but without spiritual power you are ineffective. Yet, when you have been equipped with the *power* of the Holy Spirit, all things are possible. Therefore, the ascension of Jesus Christ should make you "God inside" minded.

1 John 4:4, “Little children, you are of God [you belong to Him] and have [already] defeated and overcome them [the agents of the antichrist], because He Who lives in you is greater (mightier) than he who is in the world.” (AMP)

Now let us go back to **Acts 1:3, “To them also He showed Himself alive after His passion (His suffering in the garden and on the cross) by a series of many convincing demonstrations [unquestionable evidences and infallible proofs], appearing to them during forty days and talking to them about the things of the kingdom of God.” (AMP)**

Why was Jesus so determined to provide His church with unquestionable evidences that He is alive? The answer can be found in **John 14:15-21, “If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also. At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.”**

Jesus provided infallible proof that He is alive, and because He lives, **we live also**. And because He is alive, and seated at the right hand of God, Jesus can **manifest Himself to us**. The Greek word for manifest literally means “to cause to shine.” Jesus ascended into the throne room of grace in order to send the Holy Spirit down and empower His church for ministry. But He also wanted to cause Himself to *shine upon us*.

The ascension made it possible for the glory of the risen Christ to shine into every believer’s life. Listen to the Lord’s prayer in **John 17:22, “And the glory which You gave Me I, have given them, that they may be one just as We are one.”**

Jesus has promised to love you and manifest Himself to you. He wants to cause His glory to shine into every situation you are confronting. In fact, this Greek word also means “to be conspicuous.” The Lord wants to be conspicuous in your life and circumstances. So please remember this, when Jesus manifests Himself to you, His mighty power accompanies Him and this makes Him *very conspicuous*.

Christos anesti! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!