

Our Heavenly Substitute
Acts 1:1-11, Hebrews 4:14-16

Friends, on Tuesday November 4th 2008, millions of people across this world watched as the American people elected Barak Obama as president.

This was an historic election for many reasons. Obama was the first African American president, He received the most votes for a presidential candidate in American history, He won the popular and electoral vote by the largest margin in 12 years, as well as the largest percentage of the popular vote for a Democrat in nearly a half-century.

All this friends, because from what I remember at the time, Obama represented the hope of many Americans that things could be different, things could get better, that Americans could pull together and resurrect the American dream – “Yes we can!”

And when the final count was tallied on Nov 4th 2008 and it became evident that Barak Obama had been elected President

of the United States, his supporters and followers erupted into joyful celebration.

But friends – in the election of any government or president, we often forget that the election is simply the means the by which selection is made and that it is actually the installation – the inauguration where the President takes the oath of office that ushers that person into the power of their position and the start of their term in government.

You may have won the election, but the office still needs to be conferred upon you.

In the same way friends – as we have just finished celebrated Easter and Jesus’ victory over the grave it is easy to forget that without his Ascension into heaven - the work for which he gave his life would have remained incomplete... and the era of spreading that new life He had been resurrected into would not have begun.

Yes, the events of Christmas and Easter are very important points in the over-all plan of God – but there are other very important and significant events as well – such as Christ’s Ascension and Pentecost.

Unfortunately we don’t celebrate these events with the same intensity as Christmas and Easter, and its to our own loss really, we miss out on a fuller understanding and experience of who Jesus Christ is and what that can mean in our lives...

In essence friends – having Christmas and Easter as the only high points in our faith is really a form of pagan Christianity.

What do I mean by that? Well before Europe was Pagan, their main religious celebrations followed the cycle of the seasons and the sun.

When Europe became Christianized, the church leaders attempted to leverage the pre-existing celebrations of the winter and spring solstices by arranging for the celebrations of

Christmas and the Resurrection of Christ during those times – and thus we celebrate Christmas and Easter when we do. Which is fine – as long as that’s not the extent of your high points in the life of Christ.

Friends, – meaning that you accept it as true that he was born in a manger in Bethlehem to Mary... and he lived, was a good teacher, a good person, the Messiah – whatever that means... and then on Easter he sacrificed himself but He came back to life again.

But remember that the Apostle James warns us that “belief” in this sense is not enough - He says “*You **believe** there is One God – good – even the demons **believe** that*” (James 2:19)

So friends – you believe that the events of Christmas and Easter occurred – good even the demons believe that...

But what we need is “saving faith” – which the Holy Spirit produces in us, and strengthens in us, as we come to understand the larger story of the bible, as we are given God’s

perspective on reality – as we focus on the additional high points of the life of Jesus so that we receive the full picture of who Jesus really is, what he actually accomplished, why that is so important, and how that relates to us...

And that's what we've been working on this past month with our Substitute Series – covering some of those other highpoints of Christ's life - his baptism, his temptation, the Last Supper, and today his Ascension – Christ's inauguration into the office of Ruler over all things – King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

A simple event really as it's recounted by Luke in his book of Acts. The disciples and Jesus are out on a picnic... eating together as they have been doing over the past forty days since Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus is instructing them and teaching them – and after clarifying that the promised power from the Holy Spirit is not so much about returning political autonomy to the nation of Israel but rather more about spreading the news about Jesus

and the blessings of the Kingdom of God to the ends of the earth - Jesus is taken up from them.

They see Jesus rise up into the clouds... and they stand there – staring up into the sky, wondering perhaps what this means...

But they aren't allow the luxury of speculation for long, even as they are watching Jesus ascending... two angels come up next to the disciples and say "Hey...psst... down here... why are you still here, looking up? It's time to get to work!"

The angels confirm for the disciples and for us that this was not a test of Jesus' ability to see how high he could levitate, or to show off some new and improved ability of his resurrected body – no, the angels confirm Jesus had been taken up into heaven.

And the significance of this is reflected in what the disciples wrote later on about this event.

Peter writes that Jesus is one *“who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him”* (1 Peter 3:22)

And the Apostle Paul builds on this in his letter to the Romans when he writes *“Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”* (Rom 8:34)

And there is more significance to be discovered if we think back to when Jesus said to his disciples. *“Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”* (John 14:12)

In fact Jesus makes it plain that the continuance of God’s mission is dependent upon his ascension.

“Truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I

go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.” (John 16:7-11)

So what is riding on Christ ascending to heaven?

The sending of the Holy Spirit to convict people of their sin and enable them to have faith in Christ, the ability of believers to accomplish great works for God’s Kingdom, the authority of Christ over all other powers – spiritual, political, and natural- and his ability to intercede on our behalf.

Friends, without the Ascension the amazing events of Easter would have just fizzled out among Jesus’ immediate followers - and we wouldn’t be gathered here this morning, some two thousand years later, exploring the importance of the Ascension.

But here we are... our faith and trust in Jesus Christ as our sin substitute the proof that indeed the Holy Spirit is at work in our hearts; doing what He was sent to do by the ascended Christ.

And that initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit among the disciples in Jerusalem, the celebration of Pentecost - is yet another highlight in the Christian faith. So important, that we mark it and celebrate it next month on the 19th.

And think of all that has been done for God's Kingdom since that day by those who have been empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Truly, in many ways Christ's followers have done greater things than He has – just as He said they would.

After his resurrection, Jesus' followers numbered about 120 men and women. Yet on the day the Holy Spirit was poured out Peter and the rest of the disciples lead three thousand people to faith in Jesus Christ!

Jesus never wrote anything down – but the disciples authored the gospels and numerous letters which have become part of Holy Scripture and have been read by millions of people over the past two thousand years.

And in that time think of all the charity work, the efforts to care for the sick, the outcast, the orphans that has gone on in Jesus name, in the Spirit's power...

Think of all the languages which have been learned in order to share the gospel and translate the scriptures, think of all the study and reflection of scripture and the insights that have been written down to strengthen people's faith in Christ that has occurred by the Spirit.

Think of the all observation and study and understanding of this world – created by the Word which became flesh - that has taken place as the Spirit renews our original calling as stewards of God's creation.

All because Christ ascended...

And friends, take special note that Christ was raised up to God's right hand – a position of authority *“far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked...”* (Eph 1:21)

This means that Christ has more authority than Buddha, Mohammed, Gandhi, or any other religious tradition, or government, or law, or social construct that people might believe in – no matter how loving, peaceful, or moral those things might be.

This is important for us to realize friends and remember in our pluralistic social context where we often feel that we have no basis to make claims to the truth. But we do, Christ has ascended - He is the ultimate authority – second only to God Almighty.

But instead of being exclusive and restricting humanity's access to their Creator, as some complain – Christ's ascended humanity actually means that anyone can have a relationship with God through Him.

As the writer of Hebrews states *“we have a high priest who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence”* (Heb 4:15-16)

Friends the ascended Christ is our heavenly substitute - our intermediary, the one who can bring our needs, our cares, our concerns, our weaknesses directly to God, on our behalf - and he brings God's grace and mercy and help directly back to us in our times of need.

This is why Christ says *“And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son”* (John 14:13)

And the good news doesn't stop there - as our high priest, our heavenly substitute, Jesus' presence in heaven isn't limited to just interceding for us.

Paul states in his letter to the Ephesians that *“God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in*

Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” (Eph 2:6)

In other words friends Jesus’ ascension is our hope, our guarantee that our humanity can be in the presence of the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent everlasting divine Creator without being destroyed.

If the Word made flesh, resurrected, and ascended can be in the very presence of God Almighty – then we too shall one day be in the very presence of God Almighty in our flesh when we have been resurrected to new life.

Listen to how this coming reality is described. *“The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 22:3-5)*

Isn’t that amazing – all because Christ ascended!

So... Christmas is momentous; Easter is significant, but the Ascension... that pulls everything together and caps it all off friends.

Christ is Ascended – He is Ascended indeed!

Amen