

Second Reformed Church, Pella, Iowa
Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell, preaching
Acts 1:1-11
Sitting Down on the Job

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Taped to my study door for the past few weeks has been on the earliest artistic depictions of Jesus. It is found in the catacombs of Rome. Jesus is a very young man, no beard, looking very much like a peasant or shepherd. Fast-forward about 200 years and look at artistic renderings of Jesus. He now has a beard, looks much older, usually rather stern, often he is seated on throne and in one hands is a royal scepter, in the other an orb, a sphere representing the universe, the domain under his control. What happened in between that Jesus goes from young shepherd to old monarch? Well, for one thing, when the Emperor becomes Christian, eventually Jesus starts to resemble the emperor. The first is a portrayal of the earthly Jesus, the backwater peasant, the fugitive preacher. The second is a portrayal of the ascended and triumphant Christ, reigning over all things.

Lost in the shuffle of our calendars, last Thursday, was Ascension Day—a Christian holiday, often overlooked and one we probably have mixed feelings about celebrating. Why celebrate that Jesus is no longer on earth? Why celebrate that the winsome young man depicted in catacombs walls is now portrayed an unfriendly old monarch? (First, let me tell you that there is almost certainly no truth to the claim that Jesus ascended on Thursday because he knew it was the beginning of Tulip Time!) As we read in the Book of Acts, for forty days after Easter Jesus appeared on-and-off to his followers in Jerusalem. But then, after 40 days, Jesus was lifted up and a cloud covered him from their sight. Throughout the ages, we Christians have confessed Christ “ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He shall come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead.”

At its best, the ascension tells us that Jesus now reigns over all things; that he truly is King of King and Lord and Lords; that just as his flesh has been welcomed into God’s presence, so someday our flesh too will be in the presence of God; that while Jesus is no longer among us physically, the Holy Spirit has come and is not bounded by time and space as the embodied Jesus was. At its worst, the ascension has made Jesus seem distant, even absent. It has made us feel orphaned, overlooked. Sadly, the ascension has made Jesus no longer be the accessible peasant preacher, but the intimidating judge of heaven.

I’m often struck how many Christians have theory of the God of mood swings, or maybe the God of multiple personalities. According to this unofficial theology, the God of the Old Testament is angry and bloodthirsty. Then, thankfully, comes the warm and loving Jesus. But give him enough centuries and throw in the ascension and even Jesus becomes dour and distant, settled on an unapproachable throne. Anthropologists of religion will tell you the rise in the interest and veneration of Mary among Christians was an effort to find another welcoming figure, once Jesus had gotten uppity so to speak. Of course, God, while a Trinitarian community, is one, so God has no multiple personalities or mood swings. God is always God and the God we see and know in Jesus is the clearest representation we have of God.

Posture or pose carry important messages. As a high schooler, I worked bagging groceries.

When business was slow, the boss made sure of two things. We could never put our hands in our pockets and we could never stand in one place for more than five seconds. Even when there were no customers, we buzzed around the front of the store, looking very active and occupied. When the ancient Israelites first celebrated the Passover, God told them to have their sandals on and their belts fastened. Be ready to go, because you will soon be leaving Egypt. But after that, it became tradition to eat the Passover while reclining, at leisure. To recline while eating was a luxury that only free people could afford. So even lowest and poorest of the Israelites would eat Passover reclining, for they might be poor, but nonetheless they were free. In both scripture and the creed, we are told that Jesus is seated on a throne at the right of the God the Father. Jesus sits down. To confess that Christ is seated affirms that Christ is triumphant, reigning and ruling over all. The deal is done, the fate is sealed, the outcome is certain; there is no going back. Jesus is seated because nothing remains except to tie up a few loose ends, mop up exercises.

Jesus is sitting down on the job. Do you feel good about that or do you get a bit anxious at the thought? We look around to see wars and tornadoes, not to mention our kids, our work, our finances, our futures and we think, “Excuse me, Jesus—but would you mind getting off your...throne and helping out a bit down here?” We are like the manager of the grocery store where I worked—no rest, busy-work-busy. The world seems to be going to hell in hand basket and Jesus is sitting down?

It makes me wonder about the audacity, or might we call it foolishness, of those first Christians. They lived in a world where life was precarious, where travel was treacherous. Being followers of Jesus put them on the insignificant edges of society, with no rights, no protection. They were often mocked, sometimes persecuted. Yet they were the ones to boldly proclaim, “Jesus Christ is seated.” Meanwhile, we have prescriptions and triple locks on our doors and missile-defense systems, and we are the ones who anxiously wonder, “Jesus, are you really sure you should be sitting down already?” Why is it that they lived when empires or epidemics could sweep through at any time, could proclaim, “Christ is seated”? Yet we who live at an unparalleled level of comfort and safety and we find the idea of a seated Jesus rather disconcerting.

With so little external evidence to corroborate, they declared, “Jesus has accomplished all things. Jesus is sitting down. It is a statement of security and hope and courage. They heard Jesus’ words from the cross, “It is finished” not to be a whimper of defeat, but for those with ears to hear, it was a daring declaration that it is accomplished. No matter what happens, Christ is triumphant. It can never be overturned. Jesus can sit down because he has finished all things.

May we, who have investment portfolios and health insurance and airbags, come to find that our hope, our security, our future is staked to the ascended Christ, who has accomplished all things, and now can be seated.

May we know that the one seated on the throne of heaven is not a standoffish sovereign or cheerless judge, but is flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, the rough hewn, soft-hearted carpenter of Galilee.

And I can’t tell you to come and recline this morning as you share in our Passover meal, but may your heart be at rest, your soul be reclining, take your time when you come forward, grab a big

hunk of bread because we are free, we are at rest, we are secure, because Jesus Christ our King is seated on the throne.