

**“High and Lifted Up“**

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John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup> They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” <sup>22</sup> Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. <sup>25</sup> Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

<sup>27</sup> “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. <sup>28</sup> Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” <sup>29</sup> The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” <sup>30</sup> Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. <sup>31</sup> Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup> And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” <sup>33</sup> He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

## WANTING TO SEE JESUS

Today’s lesson takes place during the festival of Passover after the Triumphant Entry.

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and that really increased the crowd size as he made his way into Jerusalem.

To the Jewish leaders this was dangerous.  
The Romans would put down hard any hint of rebellion.

So, they decided to kill Jesus.  
And since Lazarus was alive and exhibit A to the power of Jesus,  
...they decided to kill him too.

Into this time of intrigue and danger some visitors from afar seek Jesus.  
Some Greeks come to Philip and they say,  
“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

There’s a plaque on this pulpit and on many pulpits across the nation with those words displayed so only the preacher can see them.

One preacher said that the first time he saw those words before he preached he was tempted to sit back down. They were obviously expecting someone else!

We’re not Jesus.  
But, we do try and help others see Jesus more clearly.

Everything we do as preachers should help people understand the life and ministry of Jesus.  
Anything else is a distraction.

In John’s gospel the word translated “see” means more than just catching a glimpse of Jesus and maybe getting an autograph.

Seeing Jesus means coming to know Jesus, trusting him and then following him.

For example, in the first chapter of John, Jesus finds Philip and tells him, “Come, follow me.” And then Philip finds Andrew and invites him to “come and see” Jesus for himself.

Philip is inviting Andrew to become a disciple just as he had become a disciple.

To “see” Jesus is to follow him and learn from him.

So when these Greeks want to “come and see” Jesus, it means they have come with more than just idle curiosity.

They want to be disciples.  
They want to see and believe in Jesus.

Notice how today’s lesson is similar to that earlier call story.

The Greeks find Philip. Philip goes to Andrew.  
And then Andrew and Philip go to tell Jesus.

The whole world is coming to Jesus.  
Even the Greeks want to come and see him.

## THE HOUR HAS COME

And this is exactly what the religious leaders feared.  
These leaders now feel trapped in a corner.

They have to kill Jesus.  
If they don’t, the Romans will destroy them.  
In their opinion, it’s better that one man die than for a whole country to be destroyed.

Jesus recognizes the significance of this moment,  
and that’s why he says that the hour has come.  
This “hour” is the hour of his death.

That’s why the rest of John’s story will be told with a sense of urgency.

The hour has come.

But, notice that the hour of Jesus’ death will also be a time for Jesus to be glorified.  
The hour of crucifixion is also the hour of his glorification.

How can that be?  
How could death on a cross be a path to glory?

Because death on a cross is not the end of the story.

Jesus said, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Death on the cross will increase the ministry of Jesus instead of killing it.

These Greeks coming to see Jesus are just the first fruits of those who will be drawn to the kingdom of God.

A great harvest comes.

And the death and resurrection of Jesus will become the pattern that will define what it means to be his disciple in this new age.

Instead of holding on to the old way of life, disciples are called to let it go so that a new way of life might be born.

It's like planting a seed.  
It's like death and resurrection.

Paul said something similar in his letter to the Galatians. He wrote,

“I have been crucified with Christ...and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” Galatians (2:19b-2:20)

There's a line in today's lesson that would be easy to misunderstand.

In verse 25 we read, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

That word translated “hate” can also be translated “reject”.

It's the same word used to refer to what the world does to Jesus (and by extension) to his disciples. (See John 15:18-19) They are rejected.

But, Jesus tells the disciples to turn the tables on the world and reject the world's definition of life.

Instead of holding on to life, we let it go.  
We entrust our life to God in Christ and this makes all the difference.

This makes for a life that is abundant (John 10:10).

Just as the world received hope for eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus, so we receive life that is eternal through letting the old way of life go and embracing the way of Jesus.

To put it another way, when we serve others in the name of Christ, we find our true self and we find the hidden presence of the risen Christ in those we serve. (26)

## DYING TO THE OLD WAY OF LIFE

This pattern of dying to the old way of life so that a new can be embraced is something that we all experience in big and small ways.

For example, when I was in high school I wanted to play the saxophone professionally. Didn't work out.  
I managed to play in some garage bands and had a lot of fun.

But, there came a time when I realized that I was not good enough to do this for a living.  
The old dream had to die in order for new dreams to live.

We've all experienced that kind of transition.

The more difficult transition comes when we lose something or someone who is important to us.  
Perhaps we lose a job and don't know why or what we're going to be doing next.

Perhaps a loved one dies and life is never the same.

Can this death and resurrection pattern apply to those situations?

Some people might tell us to "get over it".  
But the truth of the matter is that we never "get over" even the smallest disappointments in life.

No matter how young or old we are ...we still grieve over our losses, big and small.

Christians feel pain just as intensely as anyone else. Indeed, Christians take on the pain of the world, take up a cross as a way to follow Jesus.

The priest, Henri Nouwen put it this way,

“It would be just another illusion to believe that reaching out to God will free us from pain and suffering.

Often, indeed, it will take us where we would rather not go. But, we know that without going there we will not find life.”

Is that so?

Can we use our pain and loss as a way to live a new life? Can we even use our scars as a way to even do ministry in those places we would rather not go?

I would remind you that even after the resurrection, Jesus still bore the marks of the crucifixion.

The marks of his pain allowed the disciples to really see him.

Jesus did not “get over” the pain of the cross.

He used that pain as a way to show us who his heart of compassion, and that he really did understand what it meant to be human.

## THE GLORY OF THE CROSS

Once again, I'll refer us to a verse from the book of Hebrews.

That verse tells us that we have a Savior who can empathize with our pain and our suffering ...our weakness. We have a Savior who was “tempted in every way just as we are.” (Hebrews 4:15)

And the last part of that verse goes, “...yet with sin”.

What sin did Jesus avoid?

I suggest he avoided the sin of rejecting God's way for the world's way.

Jesus rejected what Walter Wink has called the “myth of redemptive violence”.

Instead of attacking his enemies, he died for them.

He used the pain of the cross as a way to bring salvation to the world.

One of the reasons that the season of Lent lasts for forty days is that we need to spend some time focusing on the cross.

If we don’t do that, then the story of Jesus’ resurrection has no meaning.

We don’t have a connection with Jesus unless the risen One bears the scars of human suffering. We don’t have a connection with Jesus unless we know that he struggles as we struggle.

That struggle is evident in our lesson for today.

Jesus says, “Now my soul is troubled.

And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’?”

I have come to believe that how we read Scripture is important for our interpretation.

And in order to understand this passage correctly we need to pause for a long time between what we just quoted and the next line.

Something like this...

“My soul is troubled. [Pause]

And what should I say—‘Father save me from this hour?’” [Pause]

And then finally we read...

“No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”

In other words, Jesus is submitting to the glory of the cross and the resurrection.

But, we must include the pause in order to understand the passion.

That pause helps us understand that we have a Savior who knows what it means to be weak and vulnerable human being.

Jesus is not superman.  
Jesus is a man who bears the Word of God.

## HARD OF HEARING

Finally Jesus does accept the way of the cross.  
He says, "Father, glorify your name."  
And this version of "thy will be done" is confirmed by a voice from heaven.

The voice proclaims,  
"I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

In John's gospel the glory of God is present in Jesus from the very beginning.

The Word of God became flesh and blood in the man Jesus. There's no daylight between God and Jesus.

When we see Jesus, we see the glory of God.  
When Jesus speaks, God speaks.

But, the problem is this.

The people don't have eyes to see.  
... or ears to hear.

The voice from heaven proclaims this divine connection.

And yet, the people don't hear that voice clearly.

Some hear thunder.  
Some think it's the voice of an angel.

Nobody thinks it's the voice of God.

Jesus tells us that this message from heaven was for their benefit (30).  
But the people do not hear, at least yet.

Jesus knows that they don't understand.

But, he also foresees a time when they will hear and see clearly...when he is high and lifted up.

When the world pronounces judgment on Jesus and tries to drive him out forever, just the opposite happens.

Jesus is not judged.  
The world is judged.  
The evil one is dealt the decisive defeat. (31)

And when Jesus is lifted up, he will draw all people to himself. (32)

## CRUCIFIXION

What is Jesus talking about specifically with this high and lifted up language?

Our passage tells us that Jesus is talking about the “kind of death he would die”. (33)

So, “high and lifted up” refers first of all to the crucifixion.

Remember the verse from last week’s sermon?  
“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.” (John 3:14)

Maybe this is when the Greeks and everyone else will really see Jesus. They will see him on the hanging on the cross, even forgiving those who crucify him.

And they’ll hear the Roman centurion say,  
“Surely this man was the son of God.”

Such forgiveness will draw people to Jesus..  
...even his enemies.

## RESURRECTION

But, I think there are other ways that Jesus will be lifted up. Lifting up could also refer to the resurrection.

The stone is rolled away.  
The tomb is empty.  
A dead man has been lifted up.  
And this risen Christ appears to his disciples.

It is the risen Christ that brings the disciples back together and sends them out into the world.

If there were no resurrection, if Christ was not raised, then, as Paul put it,

“We’re a sad bunch of people.  
We should be pitied.” (See 1 Corinthians 15:19)

But, Christ was raised and that makes all the difference.

This year Easter is on April 1, April fool’s day.  
If Christ were not raised, we have been fooled.

But, if Christ was raised, then it is the world that is really foolish.

And as Paul also puts it in his letter to the Corinthians, that’s what happened.

In the cross, the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. (1 Corinthians 3:19)

One of the greatest proofs of the resurrection is the lives of the disciples and the work of the early church. Would those disciples really have died for the faith if they didn’t have personal knowledge of the resurrection? I don’t think so.

They saw the glory of the resurrection, and that gave the disciples a hope that was eternal. They saw Jesus lifted up from the grave.

In the same way, the glory of the resurrection is seen in the way God works in our heart.

We are changed by the power of God’s grace and the hope of life eternal. We become new creations. Our lives are turned around.

Most of you are here today because you have experienced in one way or another the power of the risen Christ. You have seen him high and lifted up. And that has lifted you.

## THE ASCENSION

There's a third way that Jesus was lifted up.  
The ascension.

In Matthew before Jesus ascends into heaven, he leaves the disciples with the great commission... to go into the world, teach others the gospel and make disciples.

And after Jesus leaves, there's one more thing that has to happen before the great harvest ...the coming of the Spirit. The Spirit is the Comforter who will teach and guide the disciples as they draw others to Christ.

To say it another way, after Jesus is lifted up, the Spirit of God comes and enables the disciples to "see" and "hear" the message and ministry of Jesus more clearly.

In fact until the Spirit comes into the lives of the disciples they still don't really understand what the kingdom of God is all about.

Even the cross, the resurrection and the ascension are not enough to create faith in the disciples. They must be filled with the Spirit. It is the Spirit that enables them to see Jesus high and lifted up.

After the cross, the resurrection, the ascension and finally, the coming of the Spirit, the disciples were able to look back on their time with Jesus and understand who he was and what he had been doing.

The end of the story helped them really "see" Jesus.  
And that's true not only of them but of us as well.

## HIGH AND LIFTED UP

In fact that's what the book of John is all about. John gives us his statement of purpose toward the end of the gospel. He wrote,

“These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31)

The whole point of the Bible is to help us see Jesus high and lifted up.

We look back at the gospel story.

And we see that story from the vantage point of the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension.

When I think about the future, things get pretty murky for me. I’m not real sure what will happen tomorrow, and I suspect most of you feel the same way.

But, when I look back on my life, I can more easily see God’s presence and care.

You see, it’s not just the biblical story that needs to be read from back to front.

It’s our story as well.

We can only see Jesus when we look back and see him high and lifted up.

And when we do that. When we look back and give thanks, that draws us closer to him today.

As the hymn puts it, the God of grace and glory gives us wisdom, give us courage for the facing of this hour.

Just as Jesus was given courage for his hour, so we are given courage for our hour, for our journey.

In God’s hands even the hour of the cross can become the hour of glory. And when we are in God’s hands we have hope, even in our darkest hour.

When we look at Jesus high and lifted up:

We see forgiveness on the cross.

We see eternal life in the resurrection.

We see a new way of life made possible today by the power of the Spirit.

The Greeks said, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

That request was granted, not only for the Greeks but for the whole world.

Amen.