

**+ Ephesians 4:7-16 + It's Time to Grow Up +
+ 7th Sunday of Easter: Ascension of Our Lord + 20 May 2012 +**

The training wheels are off. The little girl has practiced and practiced riding her bike. She's driven it everywhere with those training wheels, but today is finally the day. With her helmet securely fastened and a flutter of fear in her heart, it's time for the little girl to ride her bike like a "grown-up". So her daddy holds the seat as she gets started. His walk quickly turns into a run as she picks up speed, and soon he lets go as she sails down the road. "I did it!" Her daddy smiles because his little girl is growing up.

It was a long morning after a long drive the day before. "Who knew our son had so much stuff for such a small dorm room...and it had to be on the third floor..." Freshman orientation will be starting soon and classes start the next day. Mom makes sure the bed is made and everything is unpacked. Dad asks, "Is there anything else you need?" After some words of advice and big hugs, a tear or two is shed because the time has come for their son to start college and they need to head home. Their son is growing up.

From little on, we can't wait to grow up, even if at that moment, we're quite comfortable being kids in our parents' care. So over the years, God, in his wisdom, provides opportunities and events and people who help you "grow up", even if you don't think you're ready. He does it for your good and even blesses you.

God wants you to "grow up" spiritually too. He doesn't want you to remain spiritually immature, because that can be dangerous to your soul. Jesus knew that, so he provided an opportunity to help you and me "grow up" spiritually. He ascended into heaven, where we and all his disciples can't see him anymore, but in so doing, Jesus blesses us as we "grow up" and become spiritually mature. My friends, **IT'S TIME TO GROW UP.**

Christ's ascension is often a bittersweet celebration. We rejoice at his triumphant victory procession into heaven to take his rightful place in the position of power and authority at God's right hand. At the same time, you can't help, but feel like the disciples gazing up into the sky and wondering, "Now what?" Wouldn't it have been easier if Jesus had just stayed there with them? Jesus had commissioned them to **"go, and make disciples of all nations..."** (Matthew 28:19) How were they going to do that when they were alone like children whose parents just left them at school?

Sometimes you and I feel the same way. Wouldn't it be easier if Jesus was here to deal with the troubles you face in your daily life, the challenges you face as a Christian, or that we face as a Christian congregation? Wouldn't it be easier if Jesus could pay your bills, feed your family, deal with troubles in your marriage or your family or your job, or simply make life easier for you? Wouldn't it be easier if Jesus did the preaching and teaching and reaching out for our congregation? Yes, it would be easier, but you and I would still remain spiritually immature and the Gospel wouldn't go out like Jesus wants. So Christ returns to heaven, and we're left gazing up into the sky and feeling alone, but he's not abandoning us.

He's helping you and me "grow up". St. Paul wrote, **"When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to people." (What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)** Christ's ascension is the triumphal procession that caps off his whole work of saving you and me, that work he came to this earth to accomplish.

Jesus came to do what we could not, because you and I were hopelessly enslaved to sin. By nature, we would love to have a God who makes life easier for us right now, while leaving us captive to the sin that enslaves our souls, but Jesus didn't come to make life easier for you. No, he came to rescue you from that slavery. With an indescribable love for the loveless, Jesus humbled himself and became a human being born of a woman and born under his own holy Law. From infancy, he grew up like you and me, except without sin. After he grew up in your place and mine, Jesus suffered the punishment you and I deserve for our sins. He suffered the punishment of hell to conquer sin and Satan, and gave up his life for you.

Three days after his death, Jesus took that life back up again. When he burst forth from the tomb on Easter Sunday, Jesus conquered death and guaranteed that victory was yours. Forty days later, with all the hosts of heaven celebrating his glorious victory, Jesus ascended on high with **"captives in his train"**—his foes who could no longer prevent his saving good news from spreading throughout the world. Jesus also had another purpose in ascending to heaven—to provide his gifts of grace to us.

"But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to people.'" Jesus goes up to provide you with his necessary gifts of grace. Sometimes to help a child carry out a "grown-up" task or take on a "grown-up"

responsibility, you have to train and equip the child with the right directions and tools to carry out the task. It was no different when Jesus ascended into heaven. Jesus needed to provide the necessary gifts of his grace to enable us to “grow up” as Christians.

Already before he ascended into heaven, Jesus gave those necessary gifts of grace to his Christian church. Jesus spent three years training his disciples with his life-changing Word. He gave that Word amazing power to create living faith in stone dead hearts, to cut with the killing sharpness of his Law, and to heal with the saving balm of his good news—the Gospel. Jesus entrusted his Church with the water and Word of Holy Baptism. With Baptism’s forgiving, saving waters, the spiritually dead would be raised and souls would be brought into his waiting arms. Jesus gave his Holy Supper to his Church. Here in a miraculous way Christ would regularly give his own body and blood in, with, and under bread and wine to his faithful people for the forgiveness of their sins, for the strengthening of their faith, and the assurance that they would spend eternal life with him in heaven.

All this our ascended Lord provides for you as gifts of his grace, but the Lord also provides another gift we often take for granted—the gift of his Holy Ministry. **“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers...”** The disciples, who needed to “grow up”, were soon serving as Christ’s representatives proclaiming his Word to the ends of the earth and administering his Sacraments to help God’s people “grow up”, **“to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...”** Jesus, in his gracious mercy, still blesses his Church with pastors and teachers, who use his Gospel in Word and Sacraments to help you “grow up” in Christ and prepare you for **“works of service”** to him.

You see, God wants you to “grow up” in your faith and your understanding of God’s Word. **“Then we will no longer be little children, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.”** When the heavy storms of this life threaten to drown you, “grown up” in Christ and his Word, you can safely endure them. When the tempting winds of false teaching or the cunning deceit of others threaten to shipwreck your faith, “grown up” in Christ and his Word, you can escape those dangers. For that to be possible, Jesus had to ascend into heaven.

So what does it look like to be a spiritual “grown-up”? St. Paul describes a body of growing believers. **“That the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God...”** “Grown-ups” in the faith have unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. That means you’re not tossed around by every popular teaching or idea out there in the world or even in Christianity, but firmly grounded in God’s Word and united with others firmly grounded in God’s Word. That unity is like firm cords of faith tying God’s people together through the faithful teaching of God’s Word.

“...And become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” “Grown-ups” in the faith strive to have a Christ-like maturity when it comes to dealing with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Rather than let your emotions or your personal preferences or your human reason hold sway in how you speak or act towards a fellow believer, instead you see each one as a brother or sister in Christ, beloved by your ascended Lord. This, of course, is something with which you and I will always struggle, because each of us is selfishly sinful, but with Christ’s help, you can display true Christ-like maturity in dealing with fellow believers or with others out in the community as souls for whom Christ died and rose again.

“Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body...grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (NIV11) “Grown-ups” in Christ will speak the truth in love, which means they’ll speak in a way that continues to build up the body of Christ. Rather than tear each other down, we build each other up with loving and encouraging words that flow from an honest heart of love for Christ and one another. Those words of love show themselves in acts of love as every one of us sees the important role, the important work God has given each of us as parts of the body of Christ. That’s truly “growing up” in Christ when you recognize your need to be an active part of the body of Christ, and that’s only possible because Jesus bestows his gifts of grace on you and me as our ascended Lord.

At some point, you have to grow up. For us as Christians, that all started when Jesus ascended into heaven. He went up so you can grow up. As our ascended Lord, he still pours out his gifts of grace on us, and promises to bless them even among us. At times, growing up in the faith is going to be difficult, but in the end, Jesus does it for our good to bless us eternally. Our Lord has gone up. Now is the time for us to grow up. Amen.