

## **What is the Church?**

### Sermon 5: The Body of Christ

Passages: Eph 4:7-16  
Mark 16:1-8

### **Introduction**

#### **How big is your Jesus?**

Back in 1961, J.B. Phillips wrote a book entitled *“Your God is Too Small”*. In that book, Phillips showed how we tend to limit the true grandeur of God with our childish images of Him. Our God, says Phillips, is too small!

I would suggest that the same is true of Jesus—we have reduced Jesus to a fine preacher or a moral example, or a holy man with special miraculous powers. Yet all of these images are only childish caricatures of Christ—they all put human limits on a man who was far greater, far grander, far more expansive than this.

That’s why, this Easter Sunday, Aisen and I want to study the picture of Jesus given to us by Paul in Ephesians 4! We guarantee that here is a far bigger Jesus than you’ve ever imagined before! In verse 10, Paul writes, ***“He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.”***

According to Paul, Jesus is so big that **He fills the whole universe!** Now be honest: Has that been your image of Jesus? I doubt it! And that’s because we have tended to reduce the Gospel to focus only on the death of Jesus...as if His death was the main event!

Do you realise that more people go to church on Good Friday than on Easter? Why? Because we tend to think of Christ’s death as more important than His resurrection!

But the Apostle Paul never did this. In verse 9 of Ephesians 4, Paul asks, ***“What does he ascended mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?”*** Paul is talking about the death of Christ as His *“descent”* and Christ’s resurrection as His *“ascent”*. And Paul holds these two

movements together as part of the one Gospel story!

Let's take a moment to understand what Paul is saying here.

In the Hebrew mind, when a person died, they *descended*. First, they descended into the grave; then, as their bodies decomposed, they descended into the earth; finally, they descended into *Hades*, the place of the dead which was thought to be somewhere *under* the earth. Death is a movement downward! And this is exactly the movement that Jesus followed: **He died, he was buried, and he descended into *Hades*.**

But, three days later (unlike the rest of us human beings), Jesus' body miraculously changed directions—He went from *descending* to *ascending*!

Not only was His body raised from the grave (much to the surprise of the women who came to anoint His body on Easter morning), but for the next 50 days, His resurrection body was seen by hundreds of people. But that wasn't the end to His upward movement! One day, while standing on the Mount of Olives with His disciples, Jesus' human body was taken up in a cloud and raised into heaven. He physically ascended!

I don't know if you've ever seen that Telstra BigPond commercial with the old guy in a blue Kombi? Do you remember the song that they would sing as they travelled around Australia? "*I've been everywhere, man; I've been everywhere!*" Well, in comparison to Jesus, that commercial is a joke! Only Jesus has been everywhere; He's been "*in heaven, on earth, and under the earth*"!

And that's why Paul says, in verse 10, that "***He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.***" In other words, *He's been everywhere, man!* And, as a result, the whole universe is now filled with the glory of His human footprints. That's how big Jesus really is!

But, why is all this so important for us? That's what Aisen is going to talk about next!

Before he speaks, however, let's sing a song together!

## The Body of Christ

As you heard in Bart's introduction, Christ has now ascended far above all the heavens and he fills the whole universe; which also means that he rules over all things. That's why we call him "Lord".

The Pope rules over the Roman Catholic Church. Since I am not a catholic, his rule has nothing to do with me. But Christ's rule is over all things; so what does that have to do with us?

His resurrection and ascension are not only so that He can rule over the universe. Jesus is God anyway. In fact, God created the world through him. He is supposed to rule over the universe!

However, here in verse 11, it says: ***Having achieved dominion over the universe through his resurrection and ascension, he now distributes gifts to the member of his body.*** How interesting is that? When Jesus was born, the wise men offered gifts **to Jesus** to celebrate his birth. At Christmas time, we also give gifts **to each other** to celebrate Jesus' coming to this world. But after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, he now gives gifts **to us**.

As I read this passage, I cannot help but be convinced that, after his resurrection on Easter morning, *Jesus started giving us gifts to celebrate our new birth in him and the birth of his church!* So, at Christmas time we celebrate *his birthday* by giving gifts to each other, and at Easter he celebrates *our birthday* by giving us gifts.

There are a variety of gifts (or ministries) that are 'given' by the ascended Christ to his people to enable us to function and develop. Some of the categories are mentioned: Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. In fact, every one of us has already received these gifts.

For example, all of us are ‘apostles’ in the simple sense of the word. ‘Apostle’ means ‘sent one’. We have all been sent...to our workplaces, into our neighbourhoods, into our homes. We are also prophets. A prophet is someone who speaks on God’s behalf. We are all called to do that.

And every Christian is an evangelist, a pastor and a teacher. We evangelize, we pastor and teach each other and we learn from each other. Please, do not think that only Bart and I are the pastors here. Bart and I are ordained by the Archbishop, but you are all ordained by Jesus through the Holy Spirit as evangelists, pastors and teachers.

We evangelize by sharing the Gospel with others, bringing others to the truth of God. We pastor by looking after each other and managing the church. We teach by going to a Bible study group, explaining the Scriptures to others, or setting up a good example for others by living out a godly life.

In other words, every Christian is a gifted man or woman; otherwise why were you chosen by God? The purpose of Christ’s giving these gifts to the church is expressed in two phrases in verse 12: “to prepare God’s people”, “for works of service”, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

We cannot forget, especially at Easter, that Christ’s resurrection was not a *spiritual* resurrection, but a *bodily* resurrection. And his ascension was not a *spiritual* ascension, but a *bodily* ascension. His physical body is directly connected with the physical world; physicality with physicality. That means, he has physically marked out the entire universe as his own! He is Lord.

Now, because of our faith in Jesus, we are connected with his physical body through the Spirit; we died with him; we are resurrected with him, we are united in him and we rule with him. So the church is not called Jesus’ *association*, Jesus’ *organization* or Jesus’ *club*, but the *Body of Christ*; Jesus’ own personal body. His intention is to *build up his body* so it can stand with him to rule over the earth.

If you have done any sports, you know what *building* the body means. Body building improves the health of both your external and internal body. We have been given gifts to *build up* the body of Christ, so the size of the

church will grow, and, more importantly, the godly lives of brothers and sisters will also grow. This is what Paul means by “building up”. The distributing of gifts to us has a purpose, which is to build up the body of Christ.

The building up the body of Christ also has a purpose, that is expressed in verse 13: “...*until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*” It is remarkable that the purpose of the building up the body of Christ is not that we can be strong and powerful, but that we can reach unity in the faith.

Notice also that Paul does not say, “*Let’s build the body of Christ so some of you will have more knowledge than others or become more mature than others, and they can represent us.*” Paul says here clearly: ***until we all, collectively, reach the final destination.*** On Easter Sunday, I think this is an important message. Our passage today says: “*Let’s all come together to continue serving until we reach the final goal.*” We will all, collectively, reach our maturity in unity which comes from knowing, trusting and growing up into Christ.

So Bart, what will the church look like if we follow Paul’s advice?

### **Conclusion:**

Before I answer your question, let’s sing again!

One of the greatest tragedies in the history of the Christian church has been the on-going disunity between Christians. East and West, North and South; despite the fact that millions of people around the world call themselves Christians, rarely does the world see us standing together as one under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

I say this is a tragedy because, as we’ve seen in today’s passage from

Ephesians 4, Jesus deliberately marked out the entire universe with His physical presence. He is Lord over all! Moreover, in His resurrection, He has raised us up to be seated with Him in heavenly places, pouring out the gifts of heaven upon us that we might be equipped to be like Him in this world.

We are now His Body, called to fill the entire universe with the fragrance of Christ, bringing His light and love to every corner of the globe. He has equipped us to serve the world and to lovingly bring all things back to God. As Paul already made clear back in Ephesians 1, the church is “...*the fulness of him who fills everything in every way.*”

Sadly, however, instead of presenting ourselves to the world as **one Body**, under **one Lord**, in the unity of **one Spirit**, Christians have spent the past 2000 years fighting each other! Each year there are new denominations and splinter groups all proclaiming their brand of Christianity as the only true way.

Of course, Paul said that this would happen, warning us about those who use “...*every wind of teaching and... the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming*” to split up the church. And Paul is adamant that the church must resist these divisive influences by being united in the faith, built up in the knowledge of the Son of God and grounded in maturity until we all “...*attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*”. In other words, Paul believes that the church, as Christ’s Body, is called to become **as big as Jesus**, rising to full maturity *in Him* and filling the whole universe *with Him*.

But this requires that we learn to “*speak the truth in love*”. This is Paul’s advice to the church! We must cut off false rumours and gossip before they spread. We must believe the best of each other and, whenever there is a misunderstanding, we must open up face-to-face dialogue with one each other. We must never give in to the temptation to run away and divide the church. Rather, we must always seek ways to be reconciled to each other in love...for the sake of Christ’s Body!

Friends, this is the message of Easter, a message so great that it has *cosmic*

ramifications! Because Christ is risen and now fills the entire universe, He invites His church to *participate* with Him in His Lordship. Raised with Him, we, His Body, are called and equipped to fill the entire universe with His love, His grace and His presence. Surely, that is why we shout the ancient Easter greeting: “**Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!**”

May Paul’s beautiful prayer of blessing over the church in Ephesus be ours this Easter, and always:

*“<sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”*