



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“RABBI JESUS :: KING JESUS :: LIFTED UP”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 132:1-12; Luke 23:33-43

*This sermon was preached Rev. Art Gatewood on Sunday, November 25, 2018
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

I want to say a few things that relate to our New Testament lesson, before I read from Luke. It's Christ the King Sunday. We sang "Crown Him with Many Crowns" at the beginning of worship. Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. "King of Kings" we sing . . .

Before we lived in Charleston, Betts and I visited our daughter and her family here on James Island from our home in Fort Mill. One such visit, eleven years ago, seems like yesterday. Melissa's first child was born some weeks early, spent her first two weeks in neo natal intensive care. Gradually she became stronger and thrived. That fall we drove to James Island, to attend her baptism, in the little Methodist church where they worship.

Little Eliza was beautiful, wrapped in her baptismal dress. Eliza was "lifted up" from her parents arms, lifted up into the arms of their pastor, who administered the waters of baptism. Lifted up into the heart of that congregation, who will help raise her, lifted up into the heart of God. From her fragile first days, her will to live strengthened her; the care by those who loved her, strengthened her, and her young, now-healthy life was celebrated in baptism.

Lifted up. There are so many occasions when a loved one is lifted up. You see it at soccer games. Parents and young siblings watch the kid action on the field. And here comes a toddler, laughing, running on the sidelines, playing chase with her parent. The little one is caught and lifted up onto her parent's shoulders, lifted up onto the shoulders of one who loves her.

I can't recall if my daddy lifted me up onto his shoulders. That was a long time ago. But I do recall climbing the big cottonwood tree in our back yard, up and up, until I could see over the rooftops. Climbing so high, then, surprises me, now, because there later grew in me a fear of heights, where once there had been in me a love of heights. Why is that? I don't know.

Lifting up things we're not accustomed to seeing up high can be weird. Like the time we walked from the cafeteria to our college classrooms for final exams. There, up on the roof of our academic building, was the jeep that belonged to one of our classmates. On the roof! How did somebody put that jeep up on top of that building? I never did find out. Lifted up. Lifted up.

The summer we were married, Betts and I had a summer job in Ontario, Canada. We ran a morning day camp for kids. We coordinated a coffee house for teens and adults in the evening. It was a great summer job. We lived in a cabin with an old black and white TV. It was the summer of 1969 and we wanted to see the moon landing. The wire to the rooftop antenna had come loose. The Apollo astronauts were to land on the moon that next night and here I was, 25 feet off the ground, balanced on the top rungs of an old ladder, splicing a wire. Talk about being high and lifted up! I was scared to death! The next night we watched in amazement as

those space travelers landed on the surface of the moon. Lifted up by thousands, thousands of technicians and engineers, lifted them up on their travels.

My daddy was a very good salesman. Supported his young family during the great depression selling weekly premium life insurance in the blue collar neighborhoods in West Virginia, where he grew up. He was so good at it he was promoted to staff manager. But later, when he was promoted to national vice president for sales, he became self-conscious of his eighth grade education, felt he was beyond his level of competence and talent. It can be scary to be lifted up to unexpected heights, without a lot of people on the ground helping you to succeed. We know about lifting up. Raising up.

Each December we raise up a huge Chrismon Tree here, in front, to honor the Lord of Lords, the Good Shepherd, the King of Kings. We stand up in worship, to say what we believe. Rising up to honor the God of mystery and human history. We know about raising up.

We stand up and cheer at our sports events. We stand up and sing along with our favorite band at music concerts. We see players lift up their coach, carry him off the field after an unusually close victory. We raise up our drink glasses to toast the one honored at the banquet. We lift up our eyes on a clear night to marvel at the Big Dipper, the Drinking Gourd that led thousands to freedom. We raise up statues and monuments to honor people and events that changed the course of history.

Only in recent years have some of our citizens stopped raising up other citizens at the end of a rope under a tree, Emmitt Till, one name, and thousands of others. And for over one hundred years, some of our citizens raised up huge wooden crosses, and profaned that symbol of God's love for all people, setting it afire to terrorize those they hate and fear. Yes, we know about raising up.

We know the story in Luke's gospel, when Jesus healed ten lepers. Nine were Jews and went home. One, the Samaritan, returned to Jesus, with a heart full of gratitude. He fell at the feet of Jesus, thanking him. Jesus said, "Rise up, my friend, rise up, and get on with your new life."

On the last night he spent with his closest followers, Jesus did some raising up, at the table. It was Passover, the biggest religious festival of all Jews. Rabbi Jesus raised up the bread, and brought new meaning to the ancient words of blessing. Rabbi Jesus raised up the cup, and started a whole new way of experiencing their God. Passover. Jesus' friends were still puzzling over that odd little procession they made into the city, entering through the Peasant's Gate. They saw their rabbi, raised up off the ground, not onto a grand horse of King Herod, but their Jesus with his feet barely off the ground, as a young donkey carried their strange "king" into the Holy City.

Raised up? Just barely.

Would the huge festival crowd, in those city streets, would they be persuaded to raise up their small town rabbi, lift him up onto their shoulders in a popular victory, in a bloodless up-rising,

and install their Jesus as the new King of Kings, Lord of Lords? It was too much to hope for. The forces against him were too strong, too powerful, too high and mighty.

Well, if their Rabbi Jesus was to be “high and lifted up” as their new king, how was that to happen? Here’s where you can open your Bible with me. This is how Luke tells it.

Luke 23: 33-45

The hand-made sign read “King of the Jews.” What a strange king, this Jesus. His crown? Thorns. Lifted up, onto his throne of execution. A lynching, without justice. A strange king indeed.

And what? What was the heart of his teaching? In a nutshell he taught “Love God with all your heart, your mind, your body, your spirit, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.” That’s it? That’s it. They killed him for teaching *that*.

King Herod was threatened by such teaching. Herod hollered, “Lift him up! Nail him on that cross and *lift him up!*” The soldiers lifted him up. And the hand-made sign said “King of the Jews.” And his followers were frightened. They were scared to death.

“Our rabbi executed because we were singing ‘King of Kings’ and ‘Lord of Lords’ when we came in through the little Peasant’s Gate? We were only singing. We hoped he would be lifted up, yes, but *not like this!*”

“We were only singing . . .”

Rev. Art Gatewood
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