

"ASCENDED FOR YOU"

Acts 1:1-11

The Ascension of Our Lord (Observed; Series A)

Confirmation (Maisy Lindseth)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Dear Maisy,

For the last two years you have diligently worked to memorize the catechism and understand the biblical teaching it presents. You have worked hard, and you have done very well. You have learned the Christian faith. And today you have confirmed your faith. That is, you have publicly confessed this Christian faith that you were baptized into and have been taught. And you have promised to remain faithful to this teaching and to be diligent in the use of the means of grace. That is, you have promised to continue listening to the preaching of God's Word and receiving the Sacrament you are now admitted to.

And we as a congregation rejoice in this. We are happy that you have confirmed your faith. So this is good. But where is Jesus in all this? Over the last two years we have tried to impress upon you that Jesus is at the center of the Christian faith and our life as Christians. So where is Jesus in your confirmation? He is right where he is supposed to be. He has ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. From there he intercedes for you. That is, he prays for you and advocates on your behalf. And from there he rules with power and authority over all things. So as you have made this promise to hold fast to the Christian faith, Jesus is—right now and forevermore—fulfilling his promise to hold fast to you.

This is what Jesus is doing for you, Maisy. But, of course, you are not the only person Jesus is doing this for. He is doing this for his entire Church. So we'll let everyone else listen in as well.

The sermon text for the Ascension of Our Lord comes from the book of Acts, chapter 1, verses 1 through 11. It is on page 770 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Scripture reading. From Acts 1, we begin reading at verse 1.

¹In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁴And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." ⁹And when he had said these

things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

*Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

So where is he, then? We've spent the last several weeks focusing on the truth of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. So where is he, then? He didn't die again. His resurrected body is immortal. He can't die again. So where did he go? Why don't we see him walking around today? Why don't we see him on the news, raising people from the dead and thwarting terrorist plots? Why can't we get him for a guest preacher or buy his DVDs.

If Jesus is alive—and we insist that he is—where is he?

Okay, I hope this isn't actually stumping any of you. We just read about how Jesus was lifted up. And every single week we confess the truth that Jesus "ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." That's where he is now. He is in heaven, at the right hand of the Father. After his resurrection he spent forty days making physical appearances on earth. That should be more than enough time to prove his resurrection. Then, after those forty days, he ascended into heaven. And that's where he is now.

Now, that might strike us as a little disappointing. I mean, for one thing, it just seems like it would be so much easier to believe if Jesus were right here—if, like Thomas and the others, we could reach out and touch him. He could answer all our questions and settle all our controversies. He could tell all the other churches that Lutheran doctrine is right, because they don't believe me when I tell them. It just seems like Christianity would be so much easier if Jesus hadn't ascended into heaven. But I'm not so sure it would actually be easier. I think people would still find reasons to disbelieve. And I am quite confident Christians would still fight about who is the greatest. But I can't help but wonder what it would be like if Jesus had just stayed here. So it kind of seems like bad news that he ascended into heaven.

But let's be clear about this; Jesus' ascension is not *bad* news. Jesus' ascension is *good* news. The disciples even rejoiced when it happened. The gospel reading said, "They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with *great joy*" (Luke 24:52). Now maybe there was a little bit of sadness mixed in. It might be a long time before they *see* Jesus again. But they rejoiced because Jesus had taught them the benefits of his ascension.

So I'd like to consider three benefits of Jesus' ascension, as well as the responsibility we have as Christians because of it. I'll start with the benefits.

First, Jesus has opened heaven to mankind. With his crucifixion, Jesus earned the forgiveness of sins for all mankind. And this forgiveness is given freely to all who believe in him. Then, with his resurrection, Jesus demonstrated his victory over death and secured the

resurrection from the dead for all mankind. All who believe in Jesus will experience the same bodily glorification that he did. And now, with his ascension into heaven, Jesus has opened heaven for all who believe in him. Think about this—a man now dwells in heaven in bodily form. Because of the crucifixion and the forgiveness that earned, we can conceive of believing souls dwelling in heaven. But now, because of Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven, we have a complete man—both body *and* soul—living in heaven. This is a big deal. It means we will live in heaven as complete persons, not as some disembodied souls. Body and soul will be reunited when Jesus comes to raise the dead. Both our bodies and our souls will be perfected. And we will live this way in heaven forever. Jesus has opened heaven to mankind. That's the first benefit.

Second, our Savior and King has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). That's what it means to be at God's right hand. It's not a statement about the *location* of Jesus. It's a statement about the *authority* of Jesus. We have a friend in high places.

Suppose you have a problem that needs fixing—some injustice or difficulty that you just can't fix on your own. You need someone higher up to fix it. And suppose your best friend is running for President. Do you want him to win or lose? You want him to win. Sure, it means he has to move to Washington, so he won't be able to come over and watch the Twins with you. But it means he can fix your problem and do all sorts of other good things. And then, when the Twins win the World Series and visit the White House, he can invite you to come too. It's nice to have a friend in high places. But we have a friend in a place much higher than the White House. There is no higher place than the Father's right hand.

This is why we value prayer so highly—because Jesus has invited us to pray to the Father in his name, and Jesus is at the Father's right hand. When we pray to the Father, that prayer goes through Jesus. It's not like the Father hears our prayers based on our good works. It's not even like he hears those prayers as coming from a holy angel or one of the great saints of old. The Father hears those prayers as coming from Jesus himself. So we should always pray with the boldest of confidence, knowing that God the Father hears us just as he hears his own Son at his right hand. This is why we value prayer so highly.

So the second benefit is simply that we have a friend in the highest of places. Our Savior and King has authority over all things, and he uses it for our good.

And the third benefit is that he is with us always. This might sound backward. We tend to think that if he is on earth, then he is near us, and if he is in heaven, then he is far from us. But the exact opposite is true. Since Jesus has ascended into heaven, he exercises his divine omnipresence—that means, his ability to be everywhere at all times. There is nowhere you can go where Jesus is not with you.

And for us today, he has promised to be uniquely present in the Lord's Supper for the forgiveness of sins. It is because of his presence in heaven that we expect him to also be present on this altar.

So we might long for his visible presence with us on earth. And this would be good. I would love to sit down with you and listen to Jesus preach. But his ascension into heaven is even better, because now he is present with all Christians in all places and at all times.

To stand and preach in one place or to sit and rule over one nation—that would be too little of a thing for our Savior-King. When he took the form of a servant, he confined himself to one place. And that was right for a time. But now he has ascended to the highest place, so that he might exercise dominion over everything in heaven and on earth.

So now that Christ has ascended, every place where the Gospel is preached in his name, it is truly Jesus Christ himself who preaches to us. Every time a person is baptized into Jesus Christ, it is truly Jesus himself who does the baptizing. And instead of ruling over one small nation on earth, he rules over all creation.

We may think that while he was on earth he was near to us, and now that he has ascended he is far from us. But, in fact, the exact opposite is true. While he was on earth he was far from us, for he confined himself to one location. But now that he has ascended into heaven, he is nearer to us than ever, for he has ascended to fill all things.

For every baptized child of God, Christ is in us and we are in him. That means that he is here with us now. He never leaves or forsakes us. He is with us always, even to the end of age (Matt. 28:20). This is a glorious and comforting truth.

But it doesn't stop there. Just as he is in us, we also are in him. That means that we are in heaven with him now. This, of course, is something we believe by faith, because I for one have never experienced such a thing. But Scripture declares this very thing to be true, as Paul says to the Ephesians, "[God] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6).

Think about that, and let this mystery fill your heart. Where Christ is now, seated at the right hand of the Father, you are there with him, for he is in you, and you are in him. Because Jesus has ascended, he is with us always, and we are with him.

So those are the benefits of Jesus' ascension. And you might be able to think of even more.

But we also need to mention the responsibility—or commission—we have because of Jesus' ascension. He says to his disciples, "**You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth**" (1:8). The Scriptures speak of us as "ambassadors for Christ" (5:20). Every disciple is involved in Christ's mission to preach the good news to the end of the earth.

The good news of Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, ascended, and coming again—this is good news for you. But it is not just for you. This is good news for every man, woman, and child on the face of the earth. So Jesus has given this mission to his Church on earth.

Jesus is not present in visible form to preach the gospel. Instead, he has ascended into heaven so that he might be present with millions of Christians, all over the world, proclaiming the good news of repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name (Luke 24:47). This is the task of all Christians.

Now, this doesn't mean you should all become pastors or missionaries. That would be chaos. Perhaps some of you should; we desperately need more of both, just not all of you, because we don't just need people in churches proclaiming the Gospel. We also need people in factories, and schools, and daycares, and offices, and farms, and hospitals, and neighborhoods, and everywhere else you can imagine, proclaiming Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins. This is good news for the entire world, not just those already in the Church.

“ASCENDED FOR YOU” (Acts 1:1-11)

Now, I’m not saying that when you go to work this week, instead of making widgets or whatever, that you should stand up on the conveyer belt and preach a sermon. That would be a sin against your employer. But as you get to know the people around you, and as you seek to love and care for them, care for their spiritual needs as well. Learn everything you can about Jesus and his great love for us, so that when the opportunity arises, you will know what to say. And the easiest thing to do is simply invite people to church. And remember this promise of Jesus: **“I am with you always, to the end of the age”** (Matt. 28:20).

Jesus Christ—our crucified and risen Savior and King—has ascended to the right hand of the Father. He has opened heaven to us. He exercises authority over all things. And he is with us always. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.