

THE MAN IN HEAVEN

Luke 24:44-53

The Ascension of Our Lord (observed)

May 24, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Ascension of Our Lord comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 24, verses 44 through 53. Please stand as you are able for the Scripture reading. From Luke 24, we begin reading at verse 44.

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

⁵⁰ And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them.

⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and were continually in the temple blessing God.

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? Today is the Seventh Sunday of Easter. And, really, every Sunday is a mini Easter. We could sing “Jesus Christ is risen today” every day, and it would be just as true as it was on that first day of Jesus’ resurrection. The boldest claim of Christianity is that Jesus rose from the dead. This is the claim upon which all of the Scriptures stand or fall. We confess it in the creeds. We speak of it often. We insist that Jesus rose from the dead. Not only that, but his resurrected body is immortal. He did not die again, and he cannot 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 walking through hospitals healing Covid-19? 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 “carried up into heaven” (24:51). And every week we confess in the creed that Jesus “ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”

All three of the Church’s historic creeds (Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian) confess the ascension of Jesus Christ.

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.

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But 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 in Jesus if he 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. People would still find reasons to disbelieve. And I am quite confident Christians would still fight about who is the greatest. The disciples actually did this in Jesus' presence (Mark 9:34; Luke 22:24). But I still 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. "They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with *great joy*" (24:52). Now there may have been a little bit of sadness mixed in. It would be a long time before they *saw* Jesus again. But they rejoiced because Jesus had taught them the benefits of his ascension.

So we're going to consider the three main benefits of Jesus' ascension, as well as the responsibility we have as Christians because of it. I'll start with the benefits. And I'll list all three of them for you before we begin. Then I'll explain them. Number one: Jesus has opened heaven to mankind. Number two: Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. And number three: Jesus is with us always. Now let's consider each of these three 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. This is one of the reasons it is absolutely necessary that Jesus be true God and true man in one person. Everything he does for our redemption, he does it as true man, so that he might truly do all of these things in our place. This includes his ascension into heaven.

Think about this—a man now dwells in heaven in bodily form. We can expect the same thing to happen to us. This is something Christians have often had a hard time believing. In the ancient Church it took the form of a heresy called "Gnosticism." This heresy taught that everything physical is evil, and it was only spiritual things that are good. It was soundly refuted and condemned a long, long time ago, but it keeps coming up again. Today we have a tendency to think of spiritual things as being the opposite of physical things. So we are tempted to think of heaven as spiritual, and, therefore, not physical. But that is totally wrong. A thing can be both spiritual and physical at the same time. The evidence of this is Jesus' body. He rose from the dead in bodily form, and he ascended into heaven in bodily form. 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 also 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. It helps to have a friend in high places. Now imagine that your best friend is running for President. And we're assuming here that your friend is righteous, wise, and competent. Do you want them to win or lose? You probably want them to win. The downside is that they have to move to Washington, but the upside is that they can do something about your problem, and when you go visit them, you can stay in the White House. That would be pretty cool. It's nice to have a friend in high places.

But we have a friend in a much higher place than the White House. There is no higher place than the Father's right hand. Remember, when we confess that Jesus is "seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty," we're not really talking about his location. We're talking about a position of authority.

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 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 is the one that might sound backward. We tend to think that if Jesus is on earth, then he is near to 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's a fancy theological word that means his ability to be everywhere at all times. There is nowhere you can go where Jesus is not with you. He has ascended in order to fill all things.

One unique way Jesus has promised to be with us is in the Lord's Supper. And he has promised to be there for us for the forgiveness of sins. It is because of his presence in heaven that we expect him to also be present on the 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. Imagine Jesus being the guest live stream preacher for every church in the world. That would be cool. But his ascension into heaven is even better, because now he is present with all Christians in all places and at all times. And his presence is more than what can be conveyed through a TV screen.

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.

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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. One: Jesus has opened heaven to mankind. Two: Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. And three: Jesus is with us always. 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, **“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem”** (24:46-47). The Scriptures speak of us as **“ambassadors for Christ”** (1 Cor. 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. 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.

It doesn't mean that you neglect your work in order to 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).

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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.