

May 12, 2024

The Ascension of Our Lord (observed)

Texts: Acts 1:1-11; Mark 16:14-20

The Ascension of our Lord has traditionally been one of the big celebrations, the high feast days, of Christianity, right up there with Easter and Christmas. It's become more forgotten in the past several decades or so, mostly because it always lands on a Thursday – forty days after Easter. And that's too bad, because the ascension of our Lord Jesus to the right hand of the Father is an incredible source of comfort, security, and boldness for Christians. Such things are certainly needed in the Church today.

Reading a devotion by a pastor in our Synod, Rev. Will Weedon, he described the occasion of the Ascension like this: "His Ascension did not take Him far; rather it brought heaven near." Isn't that beautifully put? "His Ascension did not take Him far; rather it brought heaven near." That's the joy of Ascension Day.

"His Ascension did not take Him far." That's one of the great worries of God's people, isn't it, that our Lord has been taken away from us? It's one of the doubts the devil uses to drive us to fear.

The disciples were filled with fear that Thursday evening in Gethsemane, when their Lord was taken away from them by Judas's mob. Mary Magdalene had that fear on Easter morning, who upon seeing the empty tomb ran and tearfully reported to the disciples, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

This fear goes back to the Old Testament times, such as we hear in our reading from Second Kings. Elisha no doubt felt this fear when the sons of the prophets repeatedly told him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you?" Elijah, through whom the Lord has spoken boldly and acted in powerful miracles, he would be taken from Elisha that day. When Elijah is taken, where, as Elisha states afterward, will the people find the God of Israel?

This seeming distance, our Lord Jesus having been taken away into the heavens, can lead to worry and fear in us, as well. Questions and doubts enter our minds.

"Has Jesus left us?" He's not visibly walking around with us, and we can't visibly see Him at work all the time.

"Are we on our own to make it through this life and into heaven?" Maybe He left because He did His part, and now we have to do ours, so we better not mess that up.

"Are we homeless?" Not that we don't have somewhere to sleep at night, but if Jesus is taken from us, or far away, we wonder what to make of life in this world, what our place in it is.

"Who is watching over us?" As the world shows its hostility to the Christian faith, we worry about our security, our lives continuing as they've been.

As these and other questions pop up, when it would appear that Jesus has been taken far from us, our sinful flesh would lead us to try to deal with it ourselves. Our readings illustrate this, actually, in two different ways.

In Mark's Gospel, we hear that, when Jesus reappeared to the disciples after His resurrection, "He rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart." In response to the tragedy of the crucifixion of their Lord, the disciples give in to doubt. Jesus had said that He would die, and that He would rise again, but the disciples just can't believe it. It's too far-fetched, too unbelievable.

With unbelief comes hardness of heart. As they sit in the locked room, their fear is joined by resentment, anger. How could Jesus do this to them? How could He leave them? Their whole lives were ruined, maybe even done for, if the Jews caught them.

This resentment hardens their hearts, such that, even when the women return from the tomb, even when two disciples run in from the road to Emmaus, and announce that the Lord has risen, that they have seen Him, they refuse to believe.

Christians are tempted to this unbelief and hardness of heart. Tragedy strikes, and we ask God, "How could you let this happen?" We pray for years, and it seems God doesn't answer. We suffer for a long time, and things seem to go from bad to worse.

We grow angry at God, thinking that He is unjust, unfair, wrong. Our Lord tells us in His word that He turns all things to good, but we refuse to believe. We're tempted to think there's no way that a loving God could let such awful things happen. Maybe He is away. We too can experience this hardness of heart.

When the Holy Spirit convicts us and reveals to us that we are walking down this path, we need to repent. We might think that we're justified in our anger, our unbelief, our hardness of heart. But we're not. Just because we don't understand God's reasons doesn't mean they aren't there.

Nursing a grudge against God only hurts us. Hardening our hearts leads only to our destruction. Thus we must repent when we are tempted to this, asking God for forgiveness and the strength to bear up under the cross.

The other way we might be tempted to deal with Jesus' seeming absence is to stick our head in the clouds. After Jesus ascends, the disciples just stand there, staring into heaven, until two angels finally snap them out of it. Now perhaps they're staring because they've just watched an incredible, never-before-seen, event, and they're trying to wrap their minds around it.

But based on the words from the angels, there was some reluctance in the disciples. Jesus had told them what to do, but they stayed there, staring. Maybe, just maybe, if we stare a little longer, he'll come back, and then He'll go witness for Himself in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth. Gazing off into the clouds means not having to deal with the world and people around them.

How is this a temptation for us? We don't gaze off into the heavens, except maybe staring out a window when we should be working! But we are tempted to disconnect, if you will, our looking into heaven with our daily lives on earth.

We come to church, and we hear God's word, and we sing His praises, and we receive His Supper, and it's wonderful. But then we're tempted to separate that life, our life as Christians, from our lives in the world. Gaze into the clouds on Sunday morning, but then not want to take what our Lord

has said to us our into the world. Keep heaven for half a day, live in the world for the other six and a half, and just wait til Jesus comes back.

Yet we can't keep heaven for just an hour or two on Sunday mornings, because Christ has ascended, and as Pastor Weedon put it, has done so to bring heaven near. The Lord's ascension wasn't to a physical place, as though you could get in a spaceship and eventually make it there.

No, His ascension to heaven, to the right hand of the Father, means that He has once again taken up His almighty power and overwhelming splendor and glory which He temporarily set aside when He was born.

Our Lord is with us then with all these perfect attributes which are His as true God, even as He remains a true man. That Christ reigns over all for the sake of His Church gives us comfort and boldness in this life.

Because Christ has ascended, all the questions and doubts which the devil would raise are put to rest. "Has He left us?" No! Certainly not! Jesus promises His Church very clearly at the end of Matthew's Gospel, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Jesus is no liar, otherwise He would not be sinless and His Father would not have raised Him from the dead.

But not only is He risen indeed, He is ascended to the right hand of power. And so, not only is His promise true, but as He is almighty, there is nothing and no one that can stop Him from fulfilling His words. St. Paul writes that, having ascended, Jesus fills all things. There is nowhere you might go that He will not be with you. He has said that He is with us His Church always, and not even the devil and all His hosts can prevent that.

The Lord has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us – as we'll hear more of next week at Pentecost – and the Spirit connects us to Christ. Jesus causes His words to contain His power, even when they are read and heard and preached today. Again, as He promised, "The one who hears you (speaking to His disciples) hears me."

And of course, Jesus Christ comes to us in His Supper, manifesting not in some spiritual sense, but with His real body in, with, and under the bread and His real blood in, with, and under the wine. How exactly does He do that? I don't know. But He is God, and as the Lord of all His power is not limited by my very limited understanding.

Christ's Ascension also gives us comfort when we start to worry that we're on our own to make it through this life. Jesus says, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." We haven't been abandoned by our Lord, left to muddle through this life while He waits for us far off. No, He comes to us. He calls us to faith. He works in our hearts. He guides us through this life.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who seeks out His lost sheep, places them on His infinitely broad shoulders, and carries them back to His fold. His words, "I am with you always," mean now and forever – always!

As Jesus is always with His flock, the Church, we don't have to worry about being homeless, having a place in this life. On the one hand, this world is not our home, meaning that it isn't our final

home, our destination. The Scriptures speak beautifully of God's saints in this regard in Hebrews 11. "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth... But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city."

Christ has ascended into heaven to prepare a room for us in His Father's house. Our hope is not in this fallen world, but in the city of God, prepared for His children. There is such comfort in this, because it means that, ultimately, this life is just a part of the path on the way to the destination.

We don't need to have the perfect education and the perfect house and the perfect job and the perfect retirement and live to be 105 in order to have a "full and fulfilling life." Number one, you'll never have all that, and even if you did, it would still fail to satisfy. But even if we all die tomorrow and all our hopes and dreams we have for the future don't come to pass, well, the splendor and joy of heaven are infinitely better.

So we need not worry about this world. And at the same time, we are perfectly at home in this world. That doesn't mean that we're always comfortable and happy in this life – far from it. But it means that we're never out of place. We're here because God created us and caused us to be here. And our God is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. As the Psalm declares, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Our Lord Jesus reigns, and so we Christians never have to feel embarrassed or out-of-place on this earth.

Sure, the peoples who reject Christ will not recognize His Lordship. The world will claim that certain places or settings are off-limits to God and His word. And the prince of this world, Satan, will try to make our time here miserable. He's been raging ever since Christ broke down the gates of hell shortly before His resurrection. But the devil's efforts, his claims, are all nothing. Jesus is King, everywhere, all the time, period.

This reality takes away our worries when we wonder "Who will watch over us and take care of us?" The devil loves to put Christians through times of hardship, suffering, and want. And sometimes, Jesus lets him do this, using the devil as a tool to test Christians. But the Lord does this only for His people's benefit, that they might grow in their fear, love, and trust in Him.

Our lives are in the hands of Jesus. If He was willing to let nails be put through those hands for us, is there anything He would withhold from us that is truly good for us? Of course not! Jesus tells us to ask our Father for our daily bread, and because we are clothed in His righteousness, the Father who loves us will not fail to provide for us.

Christ has ascended to the right hand of power so that by His might He might bring us every good gift, even the very gifts of heaven. And so, we don't have to worry letting our sinful flesh figure out where to go from here. No, we live as those guided by the Spirit of Christ, comforted by His promises and made bold by His presence.

This boldness is found chiefly in proclaiming His Gospel to all the world. Again, He is King over all the world, the Lord of Creation. And as a loving King, He desires all His people to be brought into His royal banquet hall for His eternal feast.

That's why He tells the disciples in Mark's Gospel, "Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation." Not just some people. The whole creation. Even, as He says in Acts, to Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it; even to Judea and Samaria, those groups who hate each other but who both need above all else His love and forgiveness; even to the ends of the earth, whomever they are and whatever false gods, philosophies, or delusions they are trapped in.

His Kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven, comes through the word that drives back the darkness and brings lost souls to light.

Jesus Christ is King of Kings and, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the one, true, and only God. And we – we! – are His treasured people, whom He cares for, defends, and guides by His infinite power and perfect love. "His Ascension did not take Him far; rather it brought heaven near." We are in His Kingdom of Heaven – the Church – even now, and the day is coming when He will return, just as His disciples saw Him go. May our Lord hasten that day!

In the name of Jesus, amen.