

June 1, 2025

The Ascension of Our Lord (observed)

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

What would you do if you knew that you couldn't fail? If you were guaranteed to succeed at something, how would that change how you live? When it comes to worldly endeavors and desires, this question is fitting for daydreams and movies – the world of fiction.

But when it comes to the things of eternity, to the things of heaven, it's absolutely true. Because Jesus Christ has ascended to heaven and is reigning over all things for the sake of His people, the Church, that Church cannot fail.

That is the truth, the reality, which we celebrate in the Ascension of Christ. In His earthly ministry, the eternal Son of God greatly humbled Himself. He was born to a virgin betrothed to a humble carpenter. He lived a life of poverty and meekness, having less of a home than foxes with their dens and birds with their nests. He died a brutal, shameful death, abandoned by His friends, hanging naked between criminals, mocked by the very priests who claimed to worship Him.

And after He had fulfilled this great work, offering Himself as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world, He was placed in a tomb. The Living God allowed Himself to be put to death. As St. Paul would write to the Philippians, Jesus "humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

But the tomb isn't where Christ remained. No, there in the tomb, His humiliation ended and His exultation began. St. Paul continues, "Therefore, God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

It was actually those under the earth who first witnessed the glory of the risen Jesus when He descended into hell. He wasn't there to suffer, for that was finished, nor was He there to set the Old Testament saints free, as though the perfectly just God would ever send those who believe in Him to hell.

No, Christ broke down the gates of Hades, shining His blinding light into that realm of absolute darkness, to show His victory, to prove to Satan and to all who had rejected Him that His word was true, and therefore that their condemnation was just.

The exaltation of Christ continued as He rose again on the third day. As St. Luke records for us, "He presented Himself alive to them after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God."

Though still concealing His full glory, Jesus went about doing the things of God: granting peace to the fearful, forgiveness to the sinful, faith to the doubtful. He showed His hands and side, having transformed the wounds which led to His death into the proofs of love leading to life for those who believe.

Finally, Jesus gathered His disciples together, blessed them, and gave them the promise of the Holy Spirit. From there, He was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God, as St. Mark records. This doesn't mean that Jesus is confined to a specific location beside God the Father, as the Father is spirit and doesn't have a physical throne, nor a physical right hand.

No, what this means is that Jesus has now been fully exalted, taking up again His unlimited power and glory which He had set aside in His state of humiliation. The babe born of Mary is now the undying, invincible King of Heaven. The adopted Son of the carpenter is now upholding the foundations of heaven and earth. The Suffering Servant is now Lord over all – all peoples, all places, all times. He has ascended, not to go away from earth and back into heaven, but to bring the reign of heaven to earth.

As those living in His kingdom, both His kingdom of power over all creation and His kingdom of grace by faith in the hearts of Christians, the Ascension of Our Lord affects us in two key ways. And in these ways we cannot fail. The first is that, because Jesus is ruling over all things, His preservation of our earthly lives cannot fail.

Again, Jesus is King and Lord over all, possessing complete authority. He doesn't just influence feelings in people's hearts, or provide subtle nudges to history here or there. No, Jesus guides all things in heaven and on earth, from the tiniest vibrations of the atoms to the movement of galaxies throughout the cosmos. Your lives, and the lives of all people, are in His hands.

He is the God who provides for the birds; He will not fail to provide for you. He is the God who clothes the grass of the field with more splendor than Solomon; He will not fail to clothe you. He is the God who sustains life in the countless sparrows, such that not even one of them falls to the earth apart from His knowledge and will; He will not permit one day, even one second, of your earthly lives to be taken away from what He has established. As the Holy Spirit inspired David to write in the Psalms, "In Your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them."

But what about when problems come? What about cancer, and car accidents, and miscarriages? What about when it seems to us like those days are cut short? Is this in the Lord's hands as well? Yes. Jesus is Lord over this as well.

Sometimes, in cases of sin, God uses such things to punish those who rebel against Him. When His people of old rebelled and sought to go their own way, the Lord sent famine and plague and serpents upon them. When people today ignore God's word and seek after what they think is best, God sends judgments upon them as well, causing them to receive in themselves the due penalty for their error, we read in Romans. The King of Kings will not be mocked, nor will He suffer rebellion forever.

But what about those who seemingly suffer at random? What about those striving to live as faithful Christians who nevertheless suffer great sadness and tragedy? What about those who suffer and die at the hands of the wicked? Here too, God is in control.

Why He allows such tragedies to take place is often known only to Him in His infinite wisdom. Yet we do know by faith that our Lord allows even these things for a purpose. Even out of the greatest

calamities, Jesus is able to bring good. His own awful death was turned toward the greatest good: the forgiveness of all sins, the appeasement of God's wrath, the restoration of sinners. Because Jesus Christ has overcome the powers of sin, death, and hell and now reigns from the throne of heaven, Christians always have hope.

Our Lord has broken the powers of death, and He will not permit His people to be separated forever. The grave could not hold Him, and neither will it hold those who are joined to Him by faith. At the moment when a faithful Christian closes his eyes for the last time, the King sends His heavenly messengers to bring the soul of the saint into His heavenly glory, reuniting him with the saints who have gone before.

And at the Last Day, when the Lord Jesus descends as the angels foretold to the disciples, all shall be raised, and by His almighty power the saints shall be given new and perfect bodies, in which we will live forever in the new creation where righteousness dwells. Jesus is ascended, as so we will never die.

In addition to this glorious truth, there is a second way in which the Ascension affects our lives. Jesus commands us to proclaim this good news to the whole creation. We are to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. We are not witnesses of some nice morals, or comforting fables, or ways to have a more successful earthly life.

No, we are the heralds of the King of Creation, the Lord of all. Our King sends us to proclaim His Law, that, as St. Paul preached to the Athenians, "He commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness." He sends us to proclaim His Gospel, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God in Christ Jesus is eternal life. Those who refuse to repent will be cast into unending agony, but those who cry out for forgiveness will be restored and embraced by the God who has died for them.

This is the proclamation we are given as the people of God, and that proclamation cannot fail. Will some resist it, or ignore it, or take it for granted? Yes. Though God is almighty, and though He sincerely desires all to be saved, He will not force salvation on anyone, for He gives salvation through love. As St. John writes, if a person loves the world and the things of the world, then the love of God is not in him.

Yet the love of God and the power of God is able to break even the hardest of hearts, convert even the most wicked of sinners. The Gospel truly does contain the very power of God unto salvation. And so we the Church continue to proclaim the fullness of God's Word and administer the Sacraments according to Christ's command, knowing that through these Means the King is both bringing His beloved subjects into His Kingdom and then also preserving them in the faith until He calls them to Himself in heaven.

We pray unceasingly to our Father, who hears each of our prayers with perfect fatherly love and then answers them in His infinite power and perfect wisdom. We strive to live in accord with His Commandments, knowing that such lives glorify our King, show love to our neighbor, and are what is

truly best for us. We do all this with the confidence born of a living hope. Jesus Christ is Lord, ascended in glory, ruling over all things for the sake of His holy Church, and because of that, we cannot fail.

In the name of Jesus, amen.