
A PLACE FOR YOU
Sermon for Ascension Day, 2017
John 14:1-4

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is John 14:1-4: ¹ **“Let not your hearts be troubled! Believe in God and believe in Me! ² In My Father’s house there are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you, because I am going to prepare a place for you. ³ If I go to prepare a place for you, I shall also come again and take you to be with Me, so that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to where I am going.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Jesus was looking forward to the time when He could return to His heavenly home. But before He could go home, He knew what first lay ahead of Him. The work that He had begun would have to be completed. That would involve the restoration of the entire universe. It would involve rescuing people held in bondage and slavery. It would involve crushing the enemy’s head and defeating death - all of which required His own death on that accursed tree. As curious as it might seem, for life to reign everywhere again, He, the Prince of Life, would have to die. The writer to the Hebrews sums up the circle of His life, work, death, and ascension at the right hand of God this way: *“Looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God,”* (Heb. 12:2).

Jesus would suffer in His work of completing our salvation, and we can only imagine how He longed to return to His heavenly home, to be with His Father. He was undoubtedly anticipating His Father’s warm and loving embrace. He knew His Father would joyfully put the royal robe on Him, crown Him with glory and honour, and put all things under His feet. That would be a joyful

reunion, with all the hosts of heaven singing His praises. Who wouldn't look forward to a reunion like that?

The wonderful thing about this for us is that He has since completed His work of our salvation, and has since returned home, so we can be sure there is a place in His home for us too. ² **In My Father's house there are many rooms**, Jesus says. **If it were not so, I would have told you, because I am going to prepare a place for you.** ³ **If I go to prepare a place for you, I shall also come again and take you to be with Me, so that you also may be where I am.** This is a home of eternal comfort and joy, prepared for us.

Earlier tonight from our First Reading, we saw that Luke, the writer of Acts, describes the ascension like this: *"⁹After He had said this, and while they were watching Him, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him away from their sight,"* (Acts 1:9). Jesus is back home now (**preparing**) **a place for you**, and if that place is for you, then it is really yours already, and you're going to live in it. It's your promised land. He bought it for us at a great price. And He intends to see to it that you get there. His work assures you that there is a place for you.

Christ's work in bringing us out of the land of slavery and death and to the promised land is clearly pictured in the Old Testament. Exodus 15 contains Moses' song of redemption, which he sang immediately after God's remarkable rescue of the people from that iron furnace, Egypt. Egypt was really a no-man's land. The people were forsaken there with no hope of deliverance. They were utterly alone, seemingly abandoned, even by God. There was no way of escape, no place to go, with the darkness of death the only prospect, and a taskmaster so ruthless, whose grip on the people so unyielding. For them, escape was absolutely unthinkable.

But in the middle of those utterly hopeless circumstances, the miraculous deliverance occurred as if from heaven itself. In fact, the deliverer was heaven-sent. Even though Moses was the spokesman, it was the Lord Himself, who through Moses told them that He had seen their affliction, heard their cry, knew their sorrow, and had come down to deliver them and lead them to a rich new land.¹ He was in that cloud that led them out of the land of darkness and

¹ Exodus 3:8

death to the light of a new day and a new life. God was their Saviour. They came out with Him from the land of death through that canal in the waters of the Red Sea, which washed away all their enemies. They were born again, entirely free from that old life under that awful tyrant Pharaoh, whose head was crushed in the rescue. God breathed His life into them and promised them a place in which they could live and where every need would be provided for.

As surely as He had rescued them, just so certainly He was going to see to it that they would get to the place safe and sound. With the Mighty One fighting their enemies, the promised place was as good as theirs already. In His song, Moses talks about the Promised Land as if the people are *already* living there: “*You in Your mercy have led forth the people whom You have redeemed; You have guided them in Your strength to Your holy habitation,*” (Ex.15:13). They were still in the wilderness, but the place was already theirs.

The bondage of Egypt was really a foreshadowing of the greater enslavement of all of mankind here on planet Earth, and a picture of a far greater rescue. When our first parents, Adam and Eve, fell, the entire universe was plunged into impenetrable darkness. The garden became a graveyard, a place of the walking dead. People wandered aimlessly, alone, lost, and alienated from God and each other. Unbelievers must ask themselves, “*Who are we? Where are we? Why are we here?*” In the darkness of unbelief, life has no meaning or purpose. We humans have no destiny. We do not know who we are. We do not know why we’re here. We do not know where we’re going. We have no idea of how to escape this place of death, and as far as God is concerned, He’s out of the picture. We don’t want Him intruding in our lives, telling us what to do or not to do. In fact, in our heart of hearts we hate Him and want Him out of the way, so we can be free to live without restraint from God or anyone else. If salvation is to come, we’d rather it be our own doing. Luther is correct when he says that *original sin is to desire to be God.* Who on earth would want to rescue people who neither care to be rescued or believe they need to be rescued?

All the seasons of the Church Year (Christmas, Lent, Easter, and now Ascension) remind us of how utterly evil we are and of how good God really is. This is the message of all of Scripture. Moses’ song of redemption in

Exodus 15 is the Old Testament foreshadowing of God's own deliverance of humankind from this land of bondage and death in which we live. God the Son left everything behind to come into this land of aimless wandering as one of us. Jesus Himself said, "*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere [no place] to lay His head,*" (Matt. 8:20).

His lonely pilgrimage in the wilderness of our world is much more than simply being without an earthly home. In our Egypt, He served people who deserved to be left alone in eternal darkness. He trod the winepress alone, with no place of refuge, not even in God. "*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*" (Mt 27:46), He cried out in that awful darkness and abandonment, as if praying with David: "*Cast me not away from Your presence,*" (Ps. 51:11). He is the genuine Scapegoat of the Day of Atonement, banished from the face of God and wandering in the wilderness of this world, lost and alone.

The cross is where He bore the crushing burden of our sin. The cruelty, the blows, and the stripes that we deserved were laid on Him. He is the real Cain that men, finding, were determined to kill, as if He were the criminal.² He was indeed the marked man, despised and rejected. The whole creation was marshalled against Him to take away His rightful place and cast Him into outer darkness forever. What an awful place He had come to! His place was the place of endless wandering and abandonment. Why? In order to give us a place of eternal bliss and fellowship.

Remarkably, through it all, He never lost sight of "where" He had come and "where" He was to go.³ He knew who He was: the everlasting Son of the Father. He knew His purpose: reconciling the world to God. He knew His destiny: the right hand of the throne of God. In spite of being forsaken by God, He knew He would be vindicated and restored to His rightful place. And when the Father raised Him from the dead, He put everything under His feet. He is again God over all. Death, hell, and Satan must all yield to Him and declare Him their Lord. In His death and resurrection, He has crushed the enemy's

² Genesis 4:14

³ John 8:14

head. And most remarkable of all, He did it for us. In all of it, Jesus took our place. He worked the works for us and carried our crushing load.

So now we have come full circle. Today we celebrate His return on high to the place from whence He had come, the right hand of the Majesty on high, where He now intercedes for us.⁴ For His sake the Father has fully and freely forgiven us everything. Our search for a place to truly call home is over. In Him we know who we are and where we're going. As a matter of fact, Paul says in Ephesians that God has made us alive with Christ, and has “*raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,*” (2:6). In 2 Corinthians, Paul again writes: “*For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens,*” (5:1). And Peter says that we have “*an inheritance in heaven reserved for us,*” (1 Pet. 1:4). So, in Him the *place* is already ours, even as we travel through this barren wilderness. In Him we have returned to our Father’s house. **I am going to prepare a place for you**, He says. He has gone ahead and prepared the place. It’s our place, which means we own it. In the meantime, while we still make our journey in this life, He continues to serve us through Word and Sacrament, but the time is coming when we are going to enter our Father’s house, our home, and when we do, there is going to be a great big homecoming celebration. The party is at His place (home, for us) and at His expense. Our Lord will be the One who joyfully welcomes us home with open arms. He’s waiting for us. In Him, it’s certain that we’ll arrive safely.

Jesus’ ascension guarantees our ascension. There is no more aimless wandering. No more aloneness, lostness, or alienation. Our trust is in the One who became homeless so we would have a home. He is the One who makes it certain that we are going to “ *dwell in the house of the LORD for ever,*” (Ps. 23:6). **² In My Father’s house there are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you, because I am going to prepare a place for you. ³ If I go to prepare a place for you, I shall also come again and take you to be with Me, so that you also may be where I am.** May it be so! Amen.

⁴ Romans 8:34

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ASCENSION DAY

Lord God, heavenly Father, You are our strength and our song. We praise You that You have prepared salvation for us in Jesus, Your Son. We praise You for His life on earth as a human being like us, full of grace and truth. We praise You that You have revealed Yourself and Your love in Him. We thank You for Jesus' death and resurrection. We praise You that our Lord, who has offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, is now at Your right hand. Give us Your Spirit's power to believe all that He has taught us, and to do all that He has commanded us. Accept our thanks for His miracles and deeds of mercy.

By Your Spirit, help us to claim His sacrifice for our salvation, and to trust in Him for the gift of eternal life. As we now celebrate His ascension to Your right hand, give us constant joy. Enable us to centre our devotion on our living Lord on heaven's throne, ruling all things for the good of His Church and His children. Lift our minds to heaven where our Lord Jesus lives to pray for us. Give us confidence in His compassion, and in His power to bless.

Lord Jesus, continue to be present with us, as You have promised. Be present with us as You move us to witness to Your saving love to people everywhere, that Your Gospel may be proclaimed to all nations. Establish Your kingdom of grace in every land. Turn the hearts of people in every corner of the world to faith and obedience, so that every knee may bow and every tongue confess that You are both Christ and Lord.

Lord Jesus, with all things under Your feet, keep our land in righteousness and peace. Give us leaders who love and honour You. May Your Spirit hold sway in all schools, and in all institutions of learning and research. Bless all hospitals and places of mercy; and make Your healing touch evident in them. Protect us from war, disease, and every calamity; spare us from greed, rebellion, and lawlessness. Give all in our land a true love of piety and peace.

God of compassion, You hear the cries of all who are in trouble or distress; accept our prayers for those whose lives have been affected by the bombing in Manchester; We pray especially for those suddenly facing a future without a child, parent or loved one, young ones who are in deep distress, and for those who are injured or traumatised. Strengthen them in their hour of need, grant them perseverance and courage to face the future and be to them a firm foundation on which to build their lives. May You bring swift justice to any accomplices of the attack.

Lord Jesus, seated at God's right hand, preserve our faith and love during life's little day, and strengthen us to watch and pray for Your return. Make us glad that, when You come again, You will come to receive us to Yourself for ever. We offer these prayers, Christ our Lord, in Your name, which is far above every other name. Amen.

ASCENSION OF OUR LORD

Acts 1:1-11

¹ In my former book, *Theophilus*, I have written about everything that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen.

³ After His suffering, Jesus also showed these men, through many convincing proofs, that He was alive. He was seen by them during a period of forty days, and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While He was eating with them, He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, "You have heard about this from Me. ⁵ For John baptised with water, but not many

days from now you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit."

⁶ Therefore, when they met together, they asked Him, "Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He told them, "It is not for you to know the times or events that the Father has set by His own authority.

⁸ However, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the world."

⁹ After He had said this, and while they were watching Him, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him away from their sight. ¹⁰ While they were gazing into the sky as He was going, suddenly two men in white clothes

stood beside them. ¹¹ They asked, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing and looking up into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way as you have seen Him go into heaven.”

Ephesians 1:15-23

¹⁵ For this reason, since I heard about the faith that you have in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s holy people, ¹⁶ I do not stop thanking God for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I ask the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, to give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your minds will be enlightened, so that you may know the hope to which He has called you, how rich His glorious inheritance is among His holy people, ¹⁹ and how incomparably great His power is for us, who believe according to the working of His mighty power. ²⁰ He worked with that same power in Christ when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule, authority, power, dominion, and every other name that can be mentioned, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. ²² He also

put everything under His feet, and appointed Him as the Head of everything, for the benefit of the church, ²³ which is His body, completely filled by Him who fills everything in every way.

Luke 24:44-53

⁴⁴ He told them, “These are the very words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, namely, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

⁴⁵ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, “This is what Scripture has said: ‘The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day; ⁴⁷ and on the basis of His name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’ ⁴⁸ You will testify to these things.

⁴⁹ “I am sending you what My Father has promised. Wait here in the city until you are armed with power from above!”

⁵⁰ He led them out to where Bethany lay ahead of them. Then He raised His hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While He was blessing them, He left them, and was taken up to heaven.

⁵² They knelt in worship of Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

⁵³ They stayed continually at the temple, praising God.