
CHRIST IS TRULY PRESENT IN HIS GIFTS

Sermon for Ascension Day, 2018

Luke 24:44-53

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 tonight is our Gospel from before, 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, based on 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.**

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

Dear friends in Christ,

For four days in October 1529, the reformers Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli met at Castle Marburg in order to bring theological unity to a fledgling Protestantism. They seemingly agreed on almost everything, except on what we call the “real presence” of Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. Zwingli, employing human reason, insisted that the Lord’s Supper was only a symbolic remembrance. Luther, holding fast to

God's Word, maintained that Christ gives His true body and blood for us Christians to eat and to drink and thereby receive forgiveness. At the heart of this dispute - a dispute that remains today - is the understanding of who Christ is and what His ascension into heaven means for us.

For forty days after the resurrection, the risen Lord Jesus met with His disciples - that is, the eleven and those who were gathered together with them - in order to bring unity of witness to a fledgling New Testament church. He speaks His peace upon them and displays His pierced hands and feet, allowing them to touch Him and see He is really present and not a spirit. He eats a piece of broiled fish before them before telling 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.”**

Jesus taught them nothing new. He reminds them of how His entire ministry is a fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. The first public sermon preached by Jesus as recorded by Luke began with this statement: *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,”* (4:21). Jesus moves through the various books of the Old Testament, opening **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, based on His name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’** ⁴⁸ **You will testify to these things.** The message is the same: repentance and the forgiveness of sins will be preached.

But wait - Jesus says, **“These are the very words that I spoke to you while I was still with you.”** Isn't Jesus with them during these moments as He calms their fears, eats with them, and teaches them? He indeed is with them, but in a new way. Before, Jesus walked among them in humility, His divine nature hidden. Now He is exalted, having been raised by the Father. No longer does He refer to Himself as the Son of Man. Now Jesus openly calls Himself **the Messiah.**

As the Messiah, His visible presence becomes an exceptional presence. Just as He kindly spoke to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, Jesus must ascend

to the Father.¹ And so that's what He now does: 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.**

But now, doesn't that make Him far away? In our First Reading tonight from Acts chapter 1, Luke says the disciples *were gazing into the sky as He was going*, (Acts 1:10). We can picture them straining yet to see Jesus, wanting yet to see Him, wondering what they're going to do now that they can't see Him. Aren't the disciples being left alone, at least until Jesus comes back at the end of the world? Aren't we being left alone now that Jesus has become this distant God, way far away up there in heaven?

Don't we have plenty of times we wish Jesus wasn't so far away? We look all around and see a society that has for the most part turned its back on God. We see the unrighteous seemingly prosper, while we struggle. On a more personal note, every day we are faced with temptations that are too hard to bear, and we find ourselves giving in to these temptations time and time again. We cry out to the Lord for help but all we hear is silence. The only conclusion that must be made from all this apparent silence is that Jesus is not near. If we can't see Jesus, He must be far away, a God who isn't here for us when we need Him.

Back to Luther and Zwingli for a moment. Zwingli saw the ascension as Christ's escape from the earth to be seated at the Father's right hand - God's right hand being a place at the edge of the created universe. For Zwingli, Jesus went far away, and He'll come back only on the Last Day. On the other hand, Luther trusted in Christ's words when He said, "*Certainly, I am with you always, until the end of the age*," (Matt. 28:20). Luther understood that Jesus has established a new way in which He visits His people and redeems them.

During the course of the Marburg debate, Luther soon came to realise that Zwingli was of a different spirit than the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that "*an unspiritual person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know them because they are discerned spiritually*." This means that the Scriptures can

¹ John 20:17

only be spiritually understood, and this is something that only God can do for us. Zwingli rejected this working of God's Spirit and leaned on His own understanding. He was like those that Jude describes in his short letter where he writes, "*These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit,*" (Jude 19). Luther, on the other hand, received the proper understanding, blessed by God to have his "*mind and heart [opened] to understand the Scriptures and to listen to the Word,*" (FC SD II 26).

Listen to the Word and have your minds and hearts opened by God's Spirit to understand the Scriptures today. Jesus doesn't abandon us in His ascension. Rather, He continues to be truly present with His people by new means. He is still with us, for Christ is truly present in His gifts, what the Church calls the Means of Grace.

By His ascension, Jesus is put "*far above all rule, authority, power, dominion, and every other name that can be mentioned,*" and is "*Head of everything, for the benefit of the church,*" (Eph. 1:21–22). In His ascension, the Crucified and Risen One has risen ever higher! Christ sits on His holy throne as a great King over all the earth², reigning His death and resurrection over us, distributing His sacrificial gifts to His people.

These gifts are no mere symbols or simple remembrances of what He's accomplished on our behalf. Rather, they are the means by which Christ gives Himself, His Word, and His work to us. These means rest upon Christ's own name; that is, on the basis of everything that the name of Christ represents: His revelation, chiefly in the cross and resurrection! Resting upon Christ's name, these gifts have both authority and power, right and might to accomplish that for which God has purposed them.

Repentance and forgiveness of sins is accomplished first through the Gospel's preaching that "**The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.**" The Gospel creates faith where there is none and strengthens the believer.

² Psalm 47

We are joined to this very same crucifixion and resurrection in the waters of Holy Baptism. The Apostle Paul writes, *“Or do you not know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might begin to live a new life. If we have been planted together with Him in the likeness of His death, then we shall be planted together with Him also in the likeness of His resurrection,”* (Romans 6:3-5). This is a Baptism in which we live as God’s holy people.

The cross is placed upon us in Holy Absolution, wherein repentant hearts receive forgiveness *“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”*

Christ feeds us His very body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar, given to us Christians to eat and to drink *for the forgiveness of our sins*.

Being thus forgiven, we mutually forgive one another, as we pray, *“And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* And our brother receives Christ through that word.

Is the Messiah really that far away from any of us? No, He is closer than we think. Through the hearing and reading of His Word, in preaching, Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper, our Messiah, Jesus Christ Himself, is present with us. It really does us good to remember too the words the Lord spoke through Moses to the Israelites, and to us too when he says, *“Do not be afraid or be terrified... For the LORD, your God... will not abandon you or forsake you,”* (Deut. 31:6).

The Lord **raised His hands and blessed (the disciples)**. ⁵¹ **While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up to heaven**. His hands remain lifted to bless us, to bless our witness and worship. Just as He blessed Luther, granting Him a bold confession at Marburg in his day, so Christ opens our minds to understand and our hearts to believe He is truly present with us today. Amen.

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. 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.

We pray for all who are suffering in any way, especially for those who are sick. Give them trust in Your love, and teach them to pray in patience and hope.

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.

THE 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 ²until 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, that you may know Him better. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your minds will be enlightened, 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, filled completely by Him who fills everything in every way.

Luke 24:44-53

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