

ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN, YET STILL WITH US

Sermon for Ascension Day, 2020

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 today is our Gospel, 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, discussing how 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, however, holding fast to God’s Word, maintained that Christ truly gives His 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 even 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 had met with His eleven disciples and those gathered together with them, to bring unity of witness to a fledgling New Testament church. With His glorified body He had earlier appeared to Mary Magdalene, to Peter, to the Emmaus disciples, and now to the group assembled here. He met them with the familiar greeting, “*Peace be with you*” (Luke 24:36), before showing them His pierced hands and feet, allowing them to touch Him and to see that He truly was present in the body, and not as a spirit. That was important because people in those days generally believed that the souls of the dead were able to roam the earth. There was a great fear of ghosts. However, it was unthinkable that a dead person could make bodily appearances. Anyhow, Jesus took a piece of broiled fish from them and ate, thus showing them that they were not seeing a ghost but rather a real, live person. He then told them, “**These are the very words that I spoke to you while I was still with you.**” What words? “**...namely, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.**”

Jesus’ words, “**while I was still with you**” point back to earlier predictions He had made before His crucifixion.¹ Now Jesus was teaching the Eleven and those with them to remember all that had been written in the Old Testament Scriptures concerning Him. However, to comprehend His teaching, Jesus had to open “**their minds to understand the Scriptures.**” This vital action by Jesus echoed an earlier lesson when those two Emmaus disciples did not fully understand the events of the crucifixion and resurrection *until* Jesus had opened their eyes.²

By themselves, sinful humans are unable to perceive that Jesus is the Messiah who has accomplished our salvation. Human

¹ Luke records three passion predictions Jesus had earlier made in 9:22, 44 and 18:33.

² Luke 24:31

eyes are blind to the reality of Jesus' presence even when He stands directly in sight, and ears are deaf to His words even when He speaks them audibly unless Jesus Himself heals the spiritual blindness and deafness.³ Eyes and minds must be opened and faith created by God in order to understand the mystery of the proclamation of His crucified and risen Son. Both salvation and its apprehension through faith are God's work. So it was that Jesus **“opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.”** He reversed the incomprehension and confusion shown by the disciples. Only after Jesus had opened their minds to understand the Old Testament Scriptures were they able to fathom that the goal of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem was to fulfil everything written about Him, namely, His saving of the world via the cross and empty tomb.

Now, in Jesus' final teaching to His disciples, He commissioned them for the mission in Acts. 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.”**

Their task would be to preach to all nations, witnessing to all that they had seen and heard. It was an awesome assignment that Jesus gave, but along with it came the promise that the disciples would be **“armed with power from above.”** The book of Acts (also written by Luke) tells the story of how the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to go with the Gospel. The journey of Jesus ended in Jerusalem; the mission of the Church would begin in that same city where Old Testament prophets had suffered on behalf of the kingdom⁴ and finally reach to the ends of the earth.

So it was that in all this, in His last moments on earth, Jesus calmed the fear of His disciples, ate with them, and taught them. There can be no doubt: He was indeed with them but in a new way. Before, Jesus had walked among them in humility, with His divine nature hidden. Now He was exalted, having been raised by the Father. No longer did He refer to Himself as the Son of Man, but openly called 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.⁵ 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, Luke recorded that the disciples *“were gazing into the sky as He was going”* (Acts 1:10). We can picture them straining yet to see Him, 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 when we wish that Jesus weren't so far away? Chronic illness, loneliness, prayers that appear to go unanswered, addictions that can't be broken, the feeling of guilt and anger – don't you wish that you could sit down with Jesus face to face and talk? Well, that's what our reason, our understanding, tells us. If we can't see Jesus, He must be far away, a God who isn't here for us when we need Him.

Let's go back to Luther and Zwingli for a moment. Zwingli saw the ascension as Jesus' 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”* (Matthew 28:20). He understood that Jesus now established a new way in which He visits His people and redeems them.

During the Marburg debate, Luther soon came to realise that Zwingli was of a different spirit than the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures can only be spiritually understood⁶, 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. Luther received the proper understanding, blessed by God to have his *“mind and heart [opened] to understand the Scriptures and to listen to the Word”* (Formula of Concord, 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. Instead, He continues to be truly present with His people by new means. He's still with us, for

³ Cf. Luke 4:18-19

⁴ Luke 13:31-35

⁵ John 20:17

⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:14

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 is “*the Head of everything, for the benefit of the church*” (Ephesians 1:21-22). In His ascension, the Crucified and Risen One has risen ever higher! The Messiah sits on His holy throne as a great King over all the earth⁷, 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 has accomplished on our behalf. Instead, they are the means by which the Messiah 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 are accomplished first through the Gospel’s preaching: “**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.

We are joined to this very same crucifixion and resurrection in the waters of Holy Baptism. It 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, and Jesus feeds us His very body and blood, given to us Christians to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of our sins, in the Sacrament of the Altar.

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 Jesus through that Word. Do you, at times, feel as though Jesus is far away? Then remember that in preaching, baptism, absolution, and the Lord’s Supper, He is with you in each of those situations.

While the Messiah parted from the disciples’ sight, being carried up into heaven, “**He raised His hands and blessed them.**” 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 the Messiah opens our minds to understand and our hearts to believe He is truly present with us today. Therefore we are made bold to witness that “**The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day**” and to worship Him with great joy. 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. 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,

⁷ Psalm 47

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.

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, 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.

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