

THE CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION

May 28, 2017

Luke 24:44-53

Dear Friends in Christ,

I remember years ago in my home congregation, every Sunday as we sat worshipping God and facing the altar, there was a wonderful picture of Jesus ascending into heaven amid the clouds and angels. It's a picture I've never forgotten. Maybe that's why Jesus' ascension to heaven has always held a special fondness for me.

However, the ascension of Jesus is a festival of the church that often takes a back seat to the other great festivals we observe. Much attention and preparation are given to Christmas, Easter and even Pentecost, but somewhere in the shuffle the Festival of the Ascension has been kind of pushed aside. Part of the problem is that Ascension always falls on a Thursday and, while there's nothing wrong with having church on a Thursday, it just doesn't seem to fit in with our normal pattern of worship. But even more basic, is the question of whether or not the Ascension of Jesus really has anything significant to say to us today?

Clearly, the other great festivals of the Church Year do have something to say to us: Christmas proclaims the birth of our Savior. Easter announces his victorious resurrection from the grave, Pentecost signals the work of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Christian Church. But what about the Ascension? What does it proclaim? That Jesus left this earth? That he said good-bye to his close friends? Good-bys are usually sad affairs. We don't like to think about them. And perhaps that's why we've tended to give the Ascension the status of a second-class passenger among all the other first-class church festivals.

I would suggest, however, that the Ascension does have something meaningful to say to us today, even after these many centuries. I believe that for the Evangelist, St. Luke, the Ascension of Jesus Christ was a pivotal event — one so significant that he felt it necessary to record it not once, but twice — first at the very end of his Gospel, and then again at the very beginning of his book of Acts. The purpose of the Gospel of Luke is to make an accurate record of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. The purpose of the book of Acts is to make an accurate record of the life and work of the church of Jesus Christ. The Ascension of Jesus is that event which provides the connection between the life and work of Jesus and the life and work of His people. In this sense the Ascension is still relevant because it continues to provide a vital connection between the life and work of Jesus and the work we are called to do as His people in our world today.

And so, it would be correct to say that we are the church of the Ascension. To say that we are the church of the Ascension means three things. First of all, the Ascension means that the work of Jesus Christ on earth is finished. If it were not finished, He would not have left this world to join His Father in heaven. But the time has now come for Him to depart from this world because He has completed and fulfilled His task as our Savior. Indeed, Jesus' task of being our Savior was completed with His victorious resurrection — that awesome event which proclaimed God's victory over sin, death and the devil.

One thing, however, still remained to be done before He ascended, and that was to explain to His disciples that He had, indeed, fulfilled the Scripture. St. Luke takes great pains to point this out at the end of his gospel. First he tells the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, where Jesus explained and interpreted the Scriptures for them as they walked. And then, for the next forty days Jesus "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures." But now, his work was finished and it was time for him to return to his heavenly home.

Jesus Christ has finished the work He came to do. I wonder how often the same can be said of us? What about all the unfinished business that just keeps gnawing at us — the unfulfilled promises that we fully intended to keep — the broken commitments — the unanswered correspondence — the failures — the heartbreaks and shattered dreams we have experienced or even caused? Who can fall asleep at night with a clear conscience, knowing that every task has been finished? Who can fall asleep at the end of life with the assurance that all things have been fulfilled, every commitment kept and every promise honored? The business of life is always left unfinished, unfulfilled and unaccomplished.

God never intended that our lives be incomplete and unfulfilled. He never intended that we should suffer the consequences of unfinished business — the pain of knowing that we have failed to do what we should. His plan was to give us Life — Life in all its fullness and completeness — Eternal Life in fellowship with Him. But in our defiance, we have turned away from that life that God wants us to have. Turning away from God the Bible calls sin. And sin is at the root of every incomplete task and every unfulfilled promise.

And what the Ascension means for you and me today is that God himself has stepped into our world of incompleteness in the person of Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that He alone is without sin. He alone faithfully completed God's plan for His life. Of all the people who ever lived, here is one who could truly say: "It is finished". It is completed. In Him the Scripture is fulfilled. In Him the promises of God are kept.

In Him there is life and salvation. What comfort and what Good News it is for you and me to know that we have a Savior who accomplished what we could never do. We need Him in our incomplete lives. We need His Ascension because it affirms to us the fact that Jesus Christ perfectly accomplished what He came to do and has now returned to the Father and to the home from whence He came. Our salvation is accomplished. God's plan for you and me has been made workable. Life with God is assured in Jesus Christ!

The second thing that the Ascension means is that the message of Jesus Christ is now to be proclaimed by His people. Our text says: "And in His name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. You are my witnesses to these things." Ascension leaves nothing unfulfilled, but it does leave us with a great responsibility! What a responsibility it was for the disciples!

Jesus was leaving eleven men with a world to evangelize. They were to start in Jerusalem. They were the witnesses. There were no back-up evangelists. Nobody else was ready to step in if they stepped out.

It was an awesome responsibility. What were the odds that these eleven would succeed? There were none. But Jesus had a way of changing the odds. He said to his men: "Behold, I send the promises of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." What kind of power was this? Holy Spirit power! Pentecost power! It was a power that made them bold to preach and bold to teach and bold to witness and bold to live and even die for Jesus. The Holy Spirit was the great Equalizer. He made these men equal to their responsibility.

If you'll remember, they weren't equal to it at first. After the death of Jesus, they lived in fear behind locked doors. They didn't know what would become of them. They might suffer the same fate as their Lord. But those days of fear weren't for long. Once they received the Spirit, they stepped out into the open and witnessed boldly in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Once the Spirit made them equal to their task, they couldn't keep quiet. In the fourth chapter of Acts, Peter and John say, "For we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." Luke tells us that the apostles "spoke the word of God with boldness" and "every day in the temple and at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."

Today, the church of the Ascension faces the same responsibility to witness. God is counting on us. He hasn't recruited a second-string lineup to take out place if we should fail. Witnessing isn't like baseball. If the pitcher doesn't do his job, the

manager can bench him and put in another pitcher. That's not how God deals with us. If we don't witness, nobody else will. Knowing that puts a big burden on us. We may tremble at the size of the task. It may seem impossible, and it would be if we were left to our own wisdom and might. But our Lord understands. He has given us the same Spirit that made His disciples equal to the task of witnessing. This is the Spirit who comes to us in Baptism, builds us in the faith, and makes our bodies His temples. This Spirit is working on us as we hear God's Word and received His Sacrament to make us equal to the task of being his witnesses today.

To belong to the church of the Ascension means that we accept our Lord's challenge to witness and that we rely on His Spirit's power working in us to get this job done. We don't duck the responsibility. We don't look for ways out. By staying close to God's Word and the Sacrament of His body and blood, we draw on the Spirit's power so that we can speak up about God's love in Jesus Christ.

Finally, the Ascension means that even though our Lord has returned to the Father, we can live each day in joy and thanksgiving, knowing that our Lord and Savior is reigning and ruling in heaven. Our text says that Jesus led his disciples out of the city as far as Bethany, where he raised his hands and blessed them. As He was blessing them, He departed from them and was taken into heaven. Then the disciples went back to Jerusalem, filled with great joy and spent all their time in the temple giving thanks to God.

It is quite amazing to see the attitude of the disciples after Jesus left them. Usually, when someone we love very much says good-bye to us, we are sad. Often there are tears and grief and empty hearts. But that wasn't the case with the disciples. Their hearts were filled with joy and thanksgiving. Just the opposite of what we would expect.

The reason for that was that they knew that Jesus had not really left them at all. St. Paul says: "He who descended is He who also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things." Jesus fills the whole universe. As our King, He rules all things for the benefit of His church. He is present everywhere.

When Jesus said: "Behold, I am with you always, even to the close of the age," He meant it. He wasn't saying empty words to make us feel good. He was speaking the truth. Jesus is with us in a most personal way. In the same sacraments that give us His Spirit's power, Jesus also gives us Himself. In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, we share in His death and resurrection. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we receive Him — body and blood. When Jesus says: "I am with you," He means it. He is with the people of His church. He is present in His Word to guide, lead, protect

and defend you. We have not been abandoned by the ascended Lord. We have not been left alone to fret and worry. Jesus leaves us Himself. That's why our lives can be filled with great joy and thankfulness, because wherever we are Jesus is with us.

The ascension really does have meaning for us even today. It means that Jesus has completed the work of salvation for us. It means that He now gives us the responsibility of being His witnesses in today's world. And it means that we can live daily in joy and thanksgiving, knowing that He is truly present — with us at all times.

May the risen and ascended Lord be your source of joy and hope as you proclaim His love and bear witness to his message of salvation. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.