

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in the name of our risen and ascended King, Jesus Christ. The title for today's message is 'Why the Ascension?' and based on the Epistle reading, from Ephesians 1. Let us pray . . . Amen.

Today we celebrate and remember the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Ascension of our Lord is a festival of exhilarating Joy. This past Thursday, the Church celebrated one of the top five, or six, major festival days in the church year. The five, or six major festivals are: Christmas, Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Pentecost, and Ascension day. This past Thursday was 40 days after the Resurrection of our Lord; the First Easter. Luke records for us in the first reading, Acts chapter 1, how 40 days after Jesus' Resurrection, He Ascended into heaven.

Historically, and even up to a not that many years ago here, there was a service on the Thursday to celebrate Christ's Ascension. The event is huge. Let me explain it this way. Christ's Ascension marks the end of His earthly ministry and the advent of the ministry of the holy Christian Church. Christ's Ascension also coincides with His victorious coronation on the Divine throne and His rule over all creation. Jesus' Ascension emphasizes His Exaltation as our Lord Jesus Christ is elevated "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion." (Eph 1:21) Christ's Ascension also proclaims our ascent with Him to the heavenly places, and finally, but never to be forgotten, it also proclaims and promises His eventual 'descent' as Judge and Deliver.

But that is not all. In Christ's Ascension prophecy was fulfilled. I want to emphasize – Christ's Ascension was absolutely necessary to fulfill the prophecy about Jesus. The Psalmists prophesied about God ascending in Psalm 47(:5), "**God has ascended with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.**" Then also in Psalm 68(:18), "**You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men.**" Jesus also prophesied about His Ascension at the beginning of the Gospel of John saying, "**No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.**" (John 3:13)

Jesus later told the disciples how His Ascension was necessary when He said, "**But now I am going to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you.**" (John 16:5-7)

Yet, Jesus' Ascension is much more than just another 'major festival' day in the Church year, or a matter of academic study; Jesus' Ascension marks the day our when we began to have an Advocate with God the Father. Christ's Ascension was not to get away from His people and creation, nor was it to separate Himself from us; rather by His Ascension Jesus now "fills all in all" and He is always with us.

Reflecting on it, the Ascension just makes sense. Jesus took His visible presence away from us so that we might believe that He is always with us! Think about it. If you could see Jesus, on T.V., or if He made occasional appearances among us, then you would want and need to see Him with your own eyes to believe that He is here with you! You would not want to pray without seeing Him or hearing His voice. You would struggle to believe that His body and blood are really present in the Sacrament there on the altar today, if you could see Him standing at the back of the church. Let me ask you: How do you know I am here? It is because you can see me with your own eyes and hear me with your ears. . . . How then do you know when I am not with you? You simply look around, you carefully listen, and if you don't see or hear me, I must not be there.

Yet with Jesus it is different. Jesus is here with us today. He attends all of our worship services. He comes to our Bible classes, congregational meetings, and events. He hears all of our prayers personally, and He answers them personally. In fact He does even more than that, Jesus promised, "**Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**" (Matthew 28:20b) and "**For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.**" (Matthew 18:20)

It may sound strange but, we can more easily trust Jesus Word because we can't see Him. Since we cannot see Him at any time, we know that we cannot expect to see Him when He is present. So, not seeing Jesus doesn't mean He is not here. Instead, we resolve the matter based on God's Word and promise.

We can honestly say Jesus is really present in this Sacrament for our forgiveness, blessing, and to strengthen our faith because we don't anticipate being able to find Him with our senses. He wanted it to be that way so that **we would walk by faith, and not by sight**, or by any other sense. There on the altar, Jesus is bringing us His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins and our salvation. How do we know? Because Jesus clearly tells us in His own Word. God does not tell us to check our minds at the door; instead He encourages us to study and examine His Word.

And Jesus is present in the Word preached. If the pastor proclaims the true Word of God in purity and honesty, the voice you hear is not the voice of the pastor alone. It is the voice of Jesus. While it is not Jesus' natural voice – it is, nevertheless, the voice which He has called, through your calling of a pastor, to be His voice here, among you, speaking His holy and saving Word to you, and in your ears.

Jesus also Ascended to send us the Holy Spirit. It is by the Holy Spirit that Jesus calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies His holy people-you, me, and all Christians. It is by the Holy Spirit that we are empowered with the power to do His works, to preach His Word, and be His witnesses throughout the whole world – beginning right here with everyone we come in contact with!

Sometimes, in our words and actions we do not confess Christ well. We sin, we hurt one another, and we make a confession of sorts which does not speak of God's love, His grace, His mercy, or His goodness. But then we also have opportunity to also confess to the world His forgiveness for those who repent of their sins and confess them. We have the power to demonstrate by our own humility and faith the peace of sins washed away and consciences cleansed by the power of Jesus Christ Himself. God's goodness and grace is absolutely amazing. Even when we sin, God turns it into an opportunity to show His goodness, His mercy, His grace, and His love!?

Jesus also ascended to remind us how He is coming again. Christ is going to be coming in the clouds. He will come visibly, and with great glory – just as the Disciples watched Him go. They will be here on that day, too, alongside us and all believers. The angel promised them that they would see Him return just as they had witnessed Him depart!

Christ's Ascension guarantees us that we will rise from our graves on the Last Day, unless we are still standing on earth alive on that great day! Jesus is coming again! His return will not be in secret, rather it will be sudden, visible, and with great glory, and all of mankind will stand before Him and see it happen and glorify God.

All those who believe in Jesus will be rejoicing in our salvation. And let me be clear on this – everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour will be rejoicing on that day when He returns in glory. Everyone who places their hope and trust in Jesus Christ and His work of salvation alone, namely His life, death in our place, and His resurrection, will stand before Christ in glory and joy and everlasting life. Those others who do not believe will also see God, but in terror they will be crushed by the knowledge that they could have trusted, that they had heard, that God had preached and spoken, sent men and entire churches to find them and win them – but they rejected Christ and His salvation to their condemnation. They will see God, but know they face eternal damnation, while we will glorify God with great and unending joy and celebrate our salvation in Christ.

And that is why Jesus ascended. The Ascension does not mean that Jesus is gone, but that He is among us. It means that we can look for Him in the Sacrament, and listen for His voice in the voice of the shepherd He has called for us to be His voice. It means that He is listening to our every prayer. It means that Jesus is at work through His Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament in our lives. And finally, it means that Jesus is coming again for us and all believers, and together we will rise from our graves to that salvation long promised, prepared on the cross and at the empty tomb, and proclaimed to you today, and every Lord's day.

Until the Final Day comes, we can rest secure knowing we are never alone. Christ is always with us. We have His forgiveness, His love, His comfort, and His strength. The world will do all it can to separate us from Him. It will discourage us, attack us, and persecute us. Jesus Himself warned us, "**In the world you will have tribulation.**"(John 16:33) Nevertheless, Jesus continued saying, "**Take heart; I have overcome the world.**" The one who overcame the world ascended into Heaven in order to fill all things. He ascended so that He could be with us to the close of the age. For now, He is with us always even though we can't see Him. Yet, at the end of the age, we shall see Him and those who believe in Him will see Him forever. Amen

(Adapted and modified from Pastor Robin Fish's Ascension Day sermon; Shaped by the Cross Lutheran Church, Laurie, MO.
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