

The grace, mercy, and peace of Christ Jesus, our Lord and ascended Saviour be yours this day. The title for today’s sermon is “losing focus”, based on the First reading from Acts chapter one. Let us pray.... Amen.

This past Thursday was Ascension Day, the 40th day after Easter. Yet, there are no decorated evergreens, no greeting cards, no gifts, no poinsettias or lilies, no colored eggs, no chocolate bunnies, and no responsive salutation, like on Easter Sunday when we proclaim: “Christ is risen. He is risen indeed, Alleluia!”, yet that Easter salutation does seem rather fitting for Ascension Day as well. There’s just a Thursday with an extra name: Ascension. It’s a forgotten festival and ignored by the world. Yet, the Church seems to have lost interest in this festival as well. Most congregations, ours included, have elected to forgo a worship service on Ascension Day and those who cling to the tradition count on few to attend. While we confess Jesus’ ascension in the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds, it seems for many, Ascension Day just doesn’t matter. And why should it? Why even focus on it? What difference does Jesus ascension have for us today?

Well, Jesus ascension does matter, incredibly, and even more so for us today. In fact, Jesus’ ascension matters every bit as much as the events on Good Friday, Easter, and Christmas. It deserves to be remembered, focused on, and celebrated. For without the Ascension of our Lord, there would be no Pentecost Day, or season, and there would be no Great Commission. Without Jesus’ ascension, the Holy Spirit would not have been sent into our world, and so there would be no Holy Christian church, no communion of saints, because there would be no Holy Spirit in the Word of God, so also no Baptism, and no Lord’s Supper. In short, there would be no faith, no forgiveness, no God with us, and no chance for eternal life. Losing focus of Jesus’ ascension, also loses focus on the Gospel and our salvation. While Jesus’ crucifixion, death, and resurrection are the climax of Jesus earthly ministry, His extraordinary visible ascent is the essential capstone of His earthly ministry. When Jesus ascended He sent the Holy Spirit who brings all of Christ’s blood bought gifts to us today.

Yet, it is not all that hard to lose our focus on something, even if it is important, just watch your kids, or better yet yourself. A recent study by Microsoft corp. says people today have an attention span of only eight seconds. Yes, only eight seconds. That’s shorter than the attention span of a goldfish. It takes more than eight seconds to speak a couple regular length sentences. It is kind of scary. Microsoft claims this “highlights the affects of an increasingly digitalized lifestyle on the brain.”(time.com/3858309/attention-spans-goldfish/)

We see this reduced attention span in the world around us, and it presents a problem for people when they need to focus on something important and get it done. We have difficulty. We get distracted and look for something more interesting, or at least different. It is easy to lose our focus on what’s most important and instead focus on other, less important matters.

But we aren't the only ones who lose our focus. Nor is losing focus a new, or modern, phenomenon. Jesus saw His own disciples lose their focus often, really often. Now, while people may have been able to pay attention longer in the 'good old days', Jesus' disciples still had great difficulty focusing on what was most important. This was very clear before Jesus' death, and it continued after Jesus' resurrection. On the days following His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples and others on many occasions. He walked with them. He talked with them. He ate with them. Jesus reminded them of all His **“words that He spoke to them while He was still with them, that everything written about Him in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”** ... *Jesus opened His disciples' minds to understand the Scriptures,*⁴⁶ and said to them, **“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,**⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.⁴⁸ **You are witnesses of these things.**⁴⁹ **And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”**(Luke 24:44-49) And they went out as far as Bethany, to the Mount of Olives, about 2 miles from Jerusalem. Jesus told His disciples to **“wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me;⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”**(Acts 1:4-5)

And the disciples, with everything Jesus had told them and opened their minds up to, asked the most important question they could think of: **“Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”**(Acts 1:6) They had already lost focus of Jesus, who He was, what He had done, and what He just finished telling them that they would receive and do. They lost focus of Jesus and the people He was sending them out to proclaim the Gospel to. They turned their focus from Jesus to look at their own belly buttons. Instead of focusing on God's great and mighty works done in their presence, instead of focusing on Jesus' Words and His commissioning of them, they focused on what they hoped Jesus would do for them, just as they did through Jesus' earthly ministry. They asked Him for an answer to a topic He did not mention, instead of focusing on what Jesus clearly said and what He told them to be prepared to do.

So Jesus did what Jesus does best, He gently refocused the disciples with His Word. **“He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”** And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”(Acts 1:7-10) It is as if Jesus said: **“I am not restoring things here; rather I am sending you out there. I'm not bringing people here to hear My Word; rather I'm sending you out there with My Word to proclaim it to people so they can hear it, the Holy Spirit will work, and people will be brought to faith and salvation in My name.”**

So, let me ask you, how often do you lose focus of Jesus, His promise, His call, His Word, and His work in your life? How often do you focus on the fact that "**you have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer you who live, but Christ who lives in you. And the life you now live in the flesh you live by faith in the Son of God, who loved you and gave himself for you.**"(Galatians 2:20) How often do you focus on how "**we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.**"(Ephesians 2:10)

Do you always focus on God Word breathed into you, or do you get distracted by the cares and demands of this world? Do you faithfully focus on the wellbeing of your neighbours and their need to hear about Jesus for their eternal salvation, or do you focus on your personal comfort? How often do you get caught focusing on the sky, like the disciples, looking for an answer, any answer, instead of looking exactly where Jesus promised they would be? We too need to be refocused and redirected in our lives. Our sinful nature drives us to focus on anything but the revealed Triune God and to ignore where Christ promises to deliver His gifts to us. The devil and the world also love to confuse us and to have us focus on the sand rather than on the Rock, who is Christ Jesus, crucified, resurrected, and ascended.

For the disciples that day, God sent a couple of angels to refocus them. The angels proclaimed Jesus would return in the same way they saw Him leave; and He will return on the clouds for all to see when He returns in glory (*Matthew 24:30*). And so the disciples followed Jesus' instructions; they stayed in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit was poured out on them. They waited for "the promise of the Father and stayed in the city until they were clothed with power from on high"(*Luke 24:49*) just ten days later on Pentecost. In the mean time, and after the day of Pentecost, "**they worshiped Jesus ... with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.**"(Luke 24:52-53)

For here is also where Jesus ascension becomes vitally important for you and me. We cannot believe, trust, fear, or love God apart from the working of the Holy Spirit. We "**cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with His gifts, sanctifies and keeps us in true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all our sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise us and all the dead, and give eternal life to us and to all who believe in Christ.**"(SC 3rd Article)

Apart from the working of the Holy Spirit in you, you cannot believe in Jesus Christ, you cannot receive Christ's forgiveness, you cannot be saved. Apart from the Holy Spirit working in and through you, you cannot do anything which pleases God, for "**without faith it is impossible to please God**"(Hebrews 11:6). Thank God, literally and daily, that He does not lose focus of us.

Thank Christ He never lost focus of why He came: to save us from our distracted and sinful selves, and also for sending the Holy Spirit to keep us focused. Thank the Holy Spirit as He continues to faithfully work exactly where Christ promised He would work—In God's Word, in Baptism and the Lord's Supper—to refocus us back to Christ and to bring us Christ's blood bought gifts of forgiveness and salvation.

For Jesus promises to release the power of the Holy Spirit which will sustain the Church as she magnifies the name of Christ, in all wisdom, knowledge, and enlightenment. Today, the Church honours Jesus' ascent into the heavenly realms. In His absence from us, we shall be comforted and sustained by the Spirit of God. In our waiting for Christ's return, we boldly proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all nations. Here is the Good News. Here is Christ and His forgiveness, comfort, and salvation for you. Rejoice that Jesus never loses His focus on you and your salvation. Amen.

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