

THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD

“Don’t Just Stand There, Look Forward”

Our Redeemer Dallas 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“And while they were gazing into heaven as He went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven.”

Today we observe the Ascension of our Lord. Technically, it was this past Thursday, forty days after Easter, when Jesus ascended into heaven. And technically, He did not “ascend” (that word is nowhere in the text) but was “taken up” from the apostles into heaven. He was *taken*. God, who sent forth His Son into the world, in order that the world might be saved through Him, took Him *back*. For, “It is finished” (John 19:30). Christ’s work of redemption was done, having purchased and won us by the blood of His cross. And so, He who humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross, was highly exalted and given the name that is above every name. He was crowned with all glory, honor, and might, taking His rightful seat at God’s right hand, where He remains to this day, upholding the universe by the word of His power.

This is good news. “God has gone up with a shout,” as we read in today’s Introit from Psalm 47. “God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne” (verses 5 and 8). We have a King, Christ our Lord, who has redeemed us. The victory is won, and our hope is certain.

The apostles knew this. And yet, they stood there

Looking Into Heaven.

They missed their friend, their Lord and their God. But it’s more than that. They looked *up*. They *gazed* upward. They stood there *staring* at the sky. What were they looking for? What was it they were expecting to see?

The two men, who are angels, ask them that very question: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?” We’re not told the answer, so we can only speculate. Did they expect Jesus to come right back? He did say, “A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me” (John 16:17). Were they hesitating, like at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, when it says that “when they saw [Jesus after He had been raised from the dead] they worshipped him, but some doubted” (28:17). Were they simply caught up in the moment, hoping it would never end? It doesn’t really

matter. What matters is that they were looking *up*, and that's not the direction they were *supposed* to be looking.

Earlier in this reading from Acts, Jesus makes the eleven a promise. They want to know the plan: "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" But Jesus says it's not for them to know. Their job is not to sit around waiting for something to happen, but to go to Jerusalem, to receive the power of the Holy Spirit, and to be His witnesses in the world, proclaiming what their eyes have seen and their ears have heard. Jesus is about to do some amazing things, and if they just stand there looking into heaven, they're going to miss it. They may miss Him, they may long for His return, but Jesus has told them where to look, and it's not up, but *forward*.

I don't know if you've ever *literally* caught yourself looking up at the sky for answers, but I'm sure you've done it *figuratively*. You've asked the same questions the disciples may have asked. You've stood there wondering, speculating, perhaps even hesitating. "Didn't Jesus promise to be with us always? Didn't He say that He would never leave us nor forsake us? So, where is He? Why put this physical distance between us? We long to be with Him, but does He really long to be with us?" We look *up*. We *gaze* up into the unknown, watching, hoping, for some kind of sign, some indication that Jesus is still with us. We drag our feet, putting off the work we've been called to do, waiting for, well, who knows what, any number of excuses. It doesn't really matter. What matters is that we are looking *up*, and that's not the direction we're *supposed* to be looking. "Up" is not where Jesus has promised to be. Rather, we, too, must be

Looking Forward.

Jesus had made the eleven a promise. The angels reminded them of that promise. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." In other words, "You're not going to find Jesus up there. Yes, He's coming back, but don't just stand there. Remember what He's told you. Remember the *promise*, that by His death and resurrection He has prepared a place for you; that He is seated at God's right hand for you; that He's about to pour out His Holy Spirit on you, that you may proclaim His name to the nations, preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Don't just stand there looking into heaven. Look down, look *forward*, and see what God is doing *in your midst*."

Looking forward is what the Ascension is all about. Looking *up* is about uncertainty. But since our God has gone up with a shout, since He sits on His holy throne, there *is* no uncertainty. Our God reigns. He is King forever. Christ has entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own precious blood, shed on the cross for sinners, thus securing an eternal redemption for all who trust in Him (Heb. 9:12). We *know* He longs to be with us,

because He came and made a way for us to be with *Him* forever. He died and rose again, thus securing a place in His Father's Home for *us*. He sits enthroned at God's right hand, filling all things (Eph. 4:10), that He may be with us in ways that He never could if He had *not* been taken up: hidden under just plain water in Baptism, the words of a man in the Absolution, and ordinary bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. In all these ways, we find Him, not somewhere up in the sky, but down here, right where He's promised to be. We look *forward*, knowing that He will come back in the same way as the apostles saw Him go: with the clouds and with a blessing (Luke 24:50). And, as the apostle John writes in Revelation 1:7, "every eye will see Him." There will be no mistaking the Last Day, no wondering or speculating—*we will know*.

And so, we look forward with *confidence*, committing ourselves to the task at hand, walking in the good works for which we were created in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:10). We are witnesses, not just with our words, but with our deeds, as well. For as we heard last week from the Epistle of James, "a doer who acts...will be blessed in His doing" (1:25). Or, as Jesus Himself puts it, "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Jesus is doing some amazing things. He is working in and through you to accomplish His good and gracious will, even without our prayer. He is blessing you, and He is making you a blessing to others, all the while pointing us forward in hope to the day of His glorious return.

No wonder the disciples returned from the Ascension

Rejoicing.

They who *had* looked up into heaven now looked forward. They returned to Jerusalem with *great joy*, for this was the Coronation Day of the King, not just of Jerusalem, but of the whole *world*, of the entire *universe*. God had set His King on Zion, His holy hill (Ps. 2:6), and, as we heard Tim chant earlier from Psalm 110, He rules in the midst of our enemies (verse 2). The battle with sin, death, and the devil is won, and the victory is ours, because He is risen (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!) and has made us His people through our Baptism into Christ. His kingdom comes to us by means of the gifts Christ freely gives. And lo, He is with us always, even to the end of the age.

And so, we pray:

Glory to the ascended Lord, that He is with us always.

Glory to the Word of God, going forth with His armies, conquering and to conquer.

Glory to Him who has led captivity captive, and given gifts for the perfecting of His saints.

Glory to Him who has gone before to prepare a place in His Father's Home for us.

Glory to the Author and Finisher of our Faith;
that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be
all worship and praise, dominion and glory; now and forever and ever.
*Amen.*¹

*The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds
in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

Soli Deo gloria

Questions for Reflection

1. What happened 40 days after Easter?
2. Do you ever find yourself looking up into heaven, whether literally or figuratively, for answers?
3. Why do the Scriptures direct our gaze downward? What are we looking *forward* to?
4. Why can we look forward with *confidence*?

¹ *Sursum Corda* 1904.