

Ascended To Be Present

Text: Luke 24:44-53

Hymn: "A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing" (LSB 493)

There is a great contrast between the two ascensions in our Old Testament reading and in our Gospel reading. Elijah is taken up in a whirlwind and Elisha tears his clothes in half, an expression of profound grief. Jesus is taken up in a cloud and the disciples worship him and return to Jerusalem with great joy. One grieves. The others rejoice. We might well ask ourselves, why do the disciples rejoice? Surely grief is a better response. They were grieved enough when Jesus was taken away from them for three days, when he was buried in the tomb. Now he's taken from them again and they don't know how long for and yet they rejoice!

Do you rejoice that Jesus is not with us? Do you rejoice that Jesus is hidden from your eyes and is at the right hand of the Father in heaven? Or like the world and most of Christendom, do you just not think about it very much? It is what it is.

And yet if you read the New Testament carefully, particularly the New Testament letters, you could argue that the whole of the Christian faith is about the fact that Jesus has ascended. Think about it. Jesus died and Jesus rose from the dead. And if he hadn't died and hadn't risen from the dead, our sins would still be *our* problem. And so we quite rightly talk about Jesus the Crucified Lord and Jesus the Risen Lord, but unless Jesus is ascended, we still have much less to rejoice in. How so?

Let me begin by reading a few verses from the fourth chapter of Ephesians, words that ought to be near and dear to all of us Paul writes,

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father

of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says,

“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”

(In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (4-12).

And you could argue that all of the letter to the Ephesians is about the risen Christ.

Already at the end of the first chapter, we are told that God

...worked His great might in Christ when he raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (19-23).

Why do the disciples rejoice when Jesus is taken, but Elisha grieved when Elijah was taken away? Because Jesus' ascension is not His way of going away, but Jesus' ascension is His way of continually being with us always. Jesus doesn't ascend in order to absent himself but Jesus ascended in order always to be present. Jesus said right before His Ascension at the end of Matthew's Gospel: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”—sounds a lot like Ephesians—“therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And, behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:19-20)

Jesus ascended so that he might be with us and therefore they rejoiced. Until that moment, from the moment of the Incarnation, he had been with some people at any given time, and sometimes he was alone. He was in the womb of his mother, he was in the arms and at the breast of his mother, he was with his family, he was with his

carpenter colleagues building houses, he was with his disciples, he was with the great crowds, he withdrew into the wilderness to be alone, he was with the high priest and the council, he was on the cross with the two thieves, he was in the tomb all by himself, he was in the garden with Mary and with his disciples after his resurrection.

Now that he's ascended to the right hand of God the Father he is wherever the right hand of God the Father is. Where is God's right hand? We know. Wherever God is doing His work, there is Jesus. That is why when Jesus ascends, he gives a charge to his apostles. According to our Gospel reading, "You are witnesses of these things" (v 48). In Acts, Jesus says, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (1:8). What does it mean to be his witnesses? It's a technical term used to refer to somebody who goes and stands before someone else and represents the presence of whoever sent him. The apostles were to stand with the full authority of Jesus. Wherever they spoke, it was as if Jesus were speaking. As Jesus Himself promised: "The one who hears you hears me" (Lk 10:16).

Wherever the apostles went, they baptized and they preached. And thereby they spread the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ to all the world. Do you remember what Jesus said to Peter and John and James? "Follow me" (Mt 4:19). It was the voice of Jesus calling those men to be his disciples. Now he sends the apostles, telling them to keep doing the same. Tell people in my name, "Follow me." And so when Jesus came to you, he said the same to you. When you were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, you heard the voice of Jesus saying, "Follow me." When you came later in childhood or later in life to obey all that Jesus had commanded by believing the Gospel that was preached to you, you responded to Jesus' call, which

was “Follow me.” Jesus Himself was calling you even if you did not see him with your eyes or hear him with your ears. In that voice, whoever’s it was, whether that of a prophet or apostle or, more likely, a pastor, there Jesus was giving gifts to men, giving gifts to you, leading a host of captives—the devil and his angels and all his ways and all his works, which you renounced at your baptism—and giving you the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of salvation, the forgiveness of sins, new life in Christ, a place at the heavenly banquet, the feast that is yet to come.

And he’s here with us today. We have a crucifix beside the pulpit. The crucifix is there not to remind us of a past event but to put in our minds that that Jesus who was crucified and who is risen is here. Our entire divine service speaks of the presence of the ascended Lord. What do we sing at the beginning of the service? “Glory be to God on high.” Who sings that? The angels sing that in the presence of God. Jesus is God and so we sing the song of the angels. A little later, what do we sing? “Holy ,holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth.” The angels sing that. Where do they sing that? In heaven. In the Book of Revelation, we hear that the angels sing that song around the throne of God and the Lamb (4:8). Every time they do, the twenty-four elders fall on their faces and worship him. We sing that because he who sits on the throne is with us.

Just before that, what do I sing to you? “Lift up your hearts.” You respond, “We lift them to the Lord.” Yet you don’t go anywhere. You lift them to the Lord who is here! To look upwards is to look to the present Jesus, to the Lord who is ascended and yet with us. It is his word that you are hearing now. It is he who will feed you with his own body and blood, not from the past, but in the present. Jesus is ascended and therefore we can rejoice. Jesus is ascended and therefore we can know that wherever we go,

whether to the farthest reaches of the earth or even here to the Our Redeemer Lutheran Wildcat Gym, Jesus is there with us, because he's at God's right hand, which is the exercise of God's power and might to subdue His enemies and bring His plan to completion. If you thought it was a big deal that the Red Sea was split in half, that was just a warm-up. That was just God spitting compared to what he now does in Jesus, His powerful right hand destroying the kingdom of Satan, removing the guilt of sin, causing resurrection after resurrection in preparation for the final day of the resurrection of all flesh, where he will make your mortality go away and give you immortality.

In order to comfort the Christians at Thessalonica, Paul wrote, "Christ will descend and we will meet him in the air." Christ's ascension means we can go to every funeral of a Christian friend or relative with tear-stained joy, knowing that just as Christ descended to the lower regions of the earth and yet ascended on high, we too who must one day descend will likewise ascend, which is to say, will be elevated into God's presence in our flesh.

So why shouldn't we rejoice? At the right hand of God we have Jesus, who is our advocate. And if he is our advocate, and he works for us and speaks for us and intercedes for us and gives gifts to men and women, what power should we fear? What could possibly take away our joy in Him who is our light and our life? May God therefore fill you with ample joy at the death and the resurrection of Jesus, his ascension, His intercession for you, his promise that he will come and cause you to ascend into God's presence. And when that happens, no one will ever take your joy away from you.

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