

# THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD

ANNO † DOMINI 2023

*“Then He led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands He blessed them.  
While he blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven.  
And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy,  
and were continually in the temple blessing God.”*

*Luke 24:50-53*

A few weeks ago at the Stewardship Picnic, a small group of us were discussing the coronation of His Majesty, King Charles III, which had taken place just the day before, and why it is that so many Americans seemed to be so enthralled by it. Of the reported 20.8 million people who tuned in at some point to watch the event on television, about half that number were Americans. (You may even know someone who got up at 3:00 in the morning to watch it live!) It was an historic event, to be sure; it's been 50 years since the last coronation of a British monarch.<sup>1</sup> But we decided it probably has more to do with the fact that having a king or a queen is so *foreign* to us. We don't *have* a monarch, and we can't imagine what it'd be like if we did.

Only, we *should* be able to imagine it, because we *do*—not as Americans, of course, but as Christians. We worship *Jesus* as King, who rules and protects the Church as its Head. As our Lord, who has redeemed us, this is one of His three offices, or functions, He performs, along with being our Prophet, who sends men to speak His Word by the power of the Holy Spirit, and our Priest, who prays for us before the Father in heaven. And if Jesus is King, then today we celebrate His coronation. That's what the Ascension of Our Lord is all about. God has gone up with a shout, as we heard sung in today's Alleluia Verse from Psalm 47. He has ascended on high, having defeated death and the devil for us, and taken His rightful place as King, not just of the Church, but of the entire *universe*.

We read about this in several places in the New Testament,<sup>2</sup> but our focus this morning will be on the Holy Gospel according to St. Luke, chapter 24. Starting in verse 50, he writes, “Then He [Jesus] led them [His disciples] out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands He blessed them.” Jesus had spent 40 days with His disciples after His resurrection. To them He had “presented

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<sup>1</sup> Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:9-14; Mark 16:19.

Himself alive after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them...and speaking about the kingdom of God.”<sup>3</sup> But now it was time for Him to go, to return to the Father who sent Him. And before He goes, He lifts up His hands and blesses His disciples. He speaks a benediction, “good words,” in much the same way that Aaron blessed the people of Israel in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> We don’t know what those words were, exactly, but just as Aaron’s priestly blessing put God’s name upon His people, giving them peace and assurance of His undeserved favor toward them,<sup>5</sup> so Jesus’ blessing surely gave His disciples peace and assurance that they had a gracious God for His sake.

We receive a similar blessing at the end of the Divine Service. The pastor, in the stead of our risen and ascended Lord, lifts up His hands and speaks God’s Word of blessing to you, the people of God by faith. These are truly good words. They are not simply a *request* to the Lord our God for His blessing, to make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you, to lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace, but because God’s Word is living and active, it *actually* blesses and keeps you in His grace, giving you peace in the knowledge of His loving-kindness toward you for Jesus’ sake. It is *proclamation*, handing over to you in real time exactly what the words say.

“While He blessed them,” Luke goes on, “He parted from them and was carried up into heaven.” He ascended; but not by His own initiative. Notice, He *was carried* up into heaven. It’s *passive*. And it’s passive wherever the New Testament talks about the Ascension. Jesus is no usurper. Unlike the devil, who props himself up as the ruler of this world, He doesn’t take the throne for Himself, but, in the words of Psalm 110, “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” The Father *invites* the Son to come up and sit at His right hand. Why is that important? Because the *only* one who may ascend the hill of the Lord and stand in His holy place is He who has clean hands and a pure heart,<sup>6</sup> and that’s Jesus. By His perfect obedience to the Law, Jesus kept His hands clean and His heart pure of sin, so that the blood He shed on the cross and the life He gave in exchange for ours was an acceptable ransom. And we *know* the Father accepted it, because He raised Jesus from the dead. As Paul writes, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 1:3.

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 9:22.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 6:27.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 24:3-4.

are still in your sins...But in fact Christ *has* been raised from the dead,"<sup>7</sup> proof that Jesus is Lord and God and that sins are forgiven.

But it gets better. Because Jesus was taken up *bodily*, not shedding His human nature like some kind of snakeskin, but keeping it intact, we have, in a sense, ascended *with* Him. Paul talks about this in Ephesians 2, saying, "God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." We'll sing something similar in the Closing Hymn: "On Christ's ascension I now build / The hope of my ascension."<sup>8</sup> Because Christ, the Word of God, became flesh and dwelt among *us*, we, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, now dwell with *Him*. We get a piggyback ride up that holy hill, so that, as Paul says in Colossians 3, "your life is hidden with Christ in God. [And] When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory."

This means that, as we heard Jesus say to His disciples a couple weeks ago, it's a *good* thing He went away. The post-resurrection disciples certainly thought so. Luke says that as soon as Jesus was carried up into heaven, they "worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great *joy*." They weren't sad about what had happened, any more than you or I would be sad about our preferred candidate winning the race or our favorite sports team/player winning the tournament. Jesus won. He takes the trophy. He wears the crown. And that's good news for us and for everyone who's on His side. For if God is for us, who can be against us? That's *our* guy up there on the podium. Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? We are justified, our sins forgiven by decree of the King. Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, not sin nor death nor the devil himself. And even those who stubbornly insist that Jesus is #NotMyKing will one day have no choice but to bow the knee and confess Him as Lord, to the glory of God the Father.<sup>9</sup>

Besides, just because we can't *see* Jesus anymore doesn't mean He's not here. Jesus promised His disciples at the end of Matthew, "Lo, I am with you

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:17, 20.

<sup>8</sup> LSB 492, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Philippians 2:10-11.

always.”<sup>10</sup> And Paul writes in another place, “He ascended far above all heavens, that He might *fill all things*.”<sup>11</sup> This helps explain why the disciples “returned to Jerusalem” and “were continually in the temple blessing [or thanking] God.” Because that’s where Jesus was: no longer in one place at one time, but everywhere at all times, *especially* in His Word and Sacraments. We began this service in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, calling to mind our Baptism. These words also remind us that Jesus is here. “For where two or three are gathered in My name,” He says, “there I am among them.”<sup>12</sup> We believe that the word of forgiveness that the pastor speaks in the Absolution is *God’s* forgiveness, according to Jesus’ own words, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them,” since, “The one who hears you hears Me.”<sup>13</sup> And in the Sacrament of the Altar, the Lord’s Supper, He makes Himself truly present, uniting us together into one holy communion, even as we participate in His own body and blood. Just because you can’t see Jesus doesn’t mean He’s not here.

And so, here *we* are, gathered in the presence of our King to receive His gifts and thank Him joyfully. He’s not up there, floating around somewhere in outer space, but as the angels said to the disciples gazing up into heaven, “Why do you stand looking up into heaven?” That’s not where you’ll find Him. Rather, *this* is where He’s promised to be, in His Church, with His people, until the day when He returns with the clouds in glory.

Today we celebrate the coronation of our King, who lives and reigns to all eternity. And by grace we shall live and reign with Him.<sup>14</sup> For He is far above all authority and power and dominion, and He’s gone to prepare a place for us. By His dying and rising again, sin is vanquished, death is destroyed, and the ruler of this world is judged, long live the King!

In † Jesus’ name. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 28:20.

<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 4:10.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 18:18.

<sup>13</sup> John 20:23; Luke 10:16.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Timothy 2:12.