

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. ✠

As we come to the fifth Sunday of the season of Easter, it is easy to lose our joy. We're hit with a stark reminder that Christ, our Lord, even though he and his resurrected flesh stood upon the ground, he no longer does. He ascended to his Father, who is in heaven, and the thought of that often can bring us sadness, just as it brought the disciples sadness.

And so it is that Christ speaks to you this very night the same words he spoke to his disciples to prepare you and his whole church to celebrate his ascension, not lament it. For he has conquered death. He has claimed victory over sin, death, and the devil.

But all too often, our thoughts lead us to ask the question of why. Why does he not stay and revel in his victory with mankind? Why must our dear Lord and Savior return to the Father at all? Easter brings with it the great joys of new life, of justification and resurrection. And as a church, we celebrate this. We spend so much time focusing on Easter, and oftentimes, we don't have the words to explain what happens next.

We do well speaking of the life and death of Christ. We love talking about his triumph over sin, death, and the devil in the crucifixion and his resurrection. But we don't know how to fit in that puzzle piece of his ascension. We would rather he stay and be among us as he was with his apostles.

But Christ's ascension does not mean our Easter joy is over. No, Christ's ascension does not put a halt to our joy, but directs it. It means that we now have to learn to live as joyful Christians in a world that hates us, in a world that hated Christ. It means we need to learn to live in a world as those bought and redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. It means our work is not done, and our strife is not over. But Christ tells us, though, that it is for our good. It is for the good of man that Christ ascends to the Father, even if we don't fully understand it now.

He will send to us his helper. He has many things he desires to tell us, but we cannot bear it now, he says to his apostles. But he will not leave us alone. If he does not leave, the helper will not come, and he desires to give to you the Spirit of God. What comfort and peace this should give us.

For we are not left alone to struggle and to fight in this world. No, Christ gives to us, he sends to us, his own Spirit to comfort, help, defend, and advocate for us, to strengthen us and to preserve us.

In the waters of holy baptism, an exorcism of sorts occurred. The old Adam, the unclean spirits that dwelt within you, were cleared out. And even in a lot of our Lutheran rites, the pastor will begin by saying, "Depart you unclean spirit, and make room for the Holy Spirit".

Because of Christ's ascension, we can say this with confidence, that when the unclean spirits are driven out and the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is placed upon their child's forehead, so too comes the Spirit.

You received this blessing, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, just as the apostles did at Pentecost, in your baptism. Now this doesn't mean the power to heal or speak in tongues, but it does impart the strength to confess Christ as Lord. For no one can say that Christ is Lord, that Jesus is Lord, apart from the Holy Spirit. It gives you the power, the ability to bear witness to His name, to believe in Him as your Passover Lamb.

Without the Spirit, we are hopeless. Without the Spirit, without the Helper, we could not convince anyone of Christ. We could not even convince ourselves. Without the Spirit, we cannot believe. How then would our testimony be heard as true and affect the hearts of men? For what weight do the mere words of man carry? What power do you have to convince another of anything that is a matter of faith? None.

But with the Spirit, you are not called to do the converting. It is not your word that converts. You are merely called to present the story, to make a confession, to confess the truth, and allow the Holy Spirit to do the work. To allow the Holy Spirit, which is given to you by Christ, to convict the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. For it is indeed the Holy Spirit working through us and in us that convicts men of these things. It is the Holy Spirit that convicts men of their sins. The Spirit shows the world that it is indeed in the wrong. That the ways of the world are corrupted by sin and full of nothing good. Full of violence and wickedness, of sexual immorality, of selfishness and greed. The Spirit convicts the world of the simple fact that it has crucified the Lord of Glory. It convicts you that

the blood of God is, by your sin, upon your hands. It is never our doing, but it is God's glory alone when a sinner is convicted of his sin and repents.

And as Christians, we are not immune to these convictions. As Christians, it is arguably greater upon us than the rest of the world. For as we repent, as we spend time preparing for confession and absolution, we examine our lives, and more and more sins come to the surface. Each time we come to confession, we realize even further the deeper and the depth of our sin. Each time we come up against the Ten Commandments, we are reminded of the hardness of our hearts and our failure to uphold God's holy law. The Spirit does not leave us in distress. The Spirit also convicts men of righteousness. The Spirit reveals to us what true righteousness is. To be righteous is to be like Christ. It is to be perfect as Christ is perfect. And the one desiring righteousness is to be perfect as He is perfect. To be perfectly forgiving.

So those convicted by their sin, by the sins of the world, might not find despair and condemnation, but peace and hope. To be perfectly forgiving. So the blood of God that is upon the hands of sinful men might not cry out for judgment as Abel's blood did, but for forgiveness. That it might be a sign and seal of the promises of God. Just as the first covenant was sealed in blood of bulls and goats thrown upon the heads of the people, so Christ's covenant of grace and mercy is sealed with His blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of your sins. And by it you are made righteous. But for those who reject Christ, there is no excuse. True righteousness is proclaimed in God's good creation. The world has been told what it is to be righteous. The law is written upon their hearts as well. And they have rejected the righteous one. And so they are guilty of each drop of blood that was spilled upon the cross. It now drips from their own hands.

And lastly, the coming of the Spirit means the world will be convicted of judgment. The Spirit, through the mouth of Christians confessing and proclaiming, the world will be convinced of a judgment that has already come. Sinners will be convinced and convicted of what has happened upon the cross where the prince of this world, the devil, has been cast out by the one true God, the one true King, Jesus Christ.

The world's false ideals have been condemned by the very presence of the truth. By the very presence of our incarnate Lord. Christ has come. Truth has been proclaimed. The way, the truth, and the life. And now judgment has come. By the cross and by his resurrection, evil has been condemned and destroyed. There is no hope left apart from Christ. Everything else has been judged. The darkness of the world has been revealed by the advent of the light of the world.

And the Spirit will force his truth upon the conscience of men. And it is a terrifying thing to recognize your own sin, to recognize the righteousness required for salvation crushes us. But for the Christian, for the one who has received the Spirit in their baptism, who has been convicted of sin and repented, and who has been washed in the blood of the righteous one, this conviction is also a comfort.

We are convicted of the truth. We know what is real. We know that we have already been judged. For in the waters of baptism, you were baptized into Christ's death, and you were baptized into his resurrection. The judgment of the last day is declared to you there in the font. You have nothing to fear. Just as Christ rose from the dead, so will you rise from the dead. Just as Christ ascended to the Father, so will you ascend. When he returns, we will meet him in the air. For we have been purchased by the blood of God.

This is the work of the Spirit, that you would know this truth. It is for this reason that Christ returns to the Father, so that you might have the Spirit and you might know this. So that it might be true among you, that you might be convicted of your sin, shown the true righteousness of Christ, and be endowed with hope and peace in the judgment.

But not only peace for the future, but peace for now. For your judgment has already happened. Christ has declared you righteous. You have nothing to fear. You may have peace as you go about your daily life, knowing it is not up to you to convince every person you meet upon the street to believe. It is your job to live as Christians. Not to grow God's church. God alone builds his church when and where it pleases him, not when and how it pleases us.

And you know this to be true. For this very church grew when the world assaulted it. When everyone of the church in the world was shrinking, this church grew. Through the trials and the frustration, everything that happened during COVID that we all would have much rather avoided, God used it for your good. That you might be a beacon of the truth, of righteousness and sin and judgment. And it is not by your own doing, but the Spirit's. With God's good and gracious mercy, we deserve none of it. God is not indebted to you, and neither is he indebted to me or to anyone. God is not indebted to you, and neither is he indebted to me or to anyone. He does what he pleases because it is good. It is his job and his will to convert the sinner. You are simply called to speak the truth, give witness, and allow the Spirit to do his work. And to pray that men turn their hearts and receive the life-giving Spirit of God, just as you received it from Christ, your Lord.

So even now, as we prepare for the Ascension, we can confidently say, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed, alleluia. Let not your hearts be saddened, but rejoice. Rejoice for Christ has ascended, and he has given to you his Spirit, the Comforter.

✠ In Jesus, name. Amen. ✠