

Text: Luke 24:44-53

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

He is Risen!

“While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven.” (v.51) That is what today is about, the Ascension of our Lord. It is one of those often-overlooked festivals in the church year, not because it is unimportant, but because – this is going to sound silly – because it is always on a Thursday. No, really. Go to church on a Thursday? Come on, pastor, people will think I’m a weirdo!

But that is only part of it. The other part, the deeper part, is that nobody likes “good byes” and this is the biggest “good bye” in all of history. The Son of God came down from heaven and took up flesh. He lived among us from His mother’s womb to manhood and at the appointed time He began His earthy ministry. For three years He preached and taught, healed and cast out demons, correcting centuries of bad theology and lived the first truly righteous life in history. During His ministry, He kept talking about dying and being raised again, but to be honest, even the Twelve, His senior class of pastors-in-training, didn’t understand what He was saying. They weren’t sure if it was all just a metaphor for something else and they were probably wishing they had taken better notes in class. Then suddenly, almost overnight, He was dead. Killed like a common criminal. The disciples were both heartbroken and fearful. What does it all mean? Are we next? But after three days of worry, their Teacher arose from the dead, just as He had promised and just as the Scriptures had foretold. What a rollercoaster of emotions: Things were fine, then Jesus was dead, then He was alive. But from the day of His resurrection, He told them that He would be ascending to the Father, not immediately, but soon. After 40 more days of instruction, of preparing them for His departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit, He left them again... for good.

Or did He? That is one of the misconceptions surrounding the Ascension, that Jesus went into heaven and therefore is no longer with us. After all, if He is there, He can’t be here, duh! That statement holds true for all humans... but Jesus is not *merely* human. He is both man and God. His glory and majesty and much of His power were set aside during His earthly life, but after His resurrection He took up not just His life but His full divine power. He proved this time and again by walking through walls, by teleporting from one location to the next. He showed them the wounds in His hands and side, wounds which did not bleed or hurt, wounds which were badges of honor for the Son of God. He is not constrained in the way we are, because He is God, whom we worship and adore. And God is not confined to anywhere.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, He did not leave us alone. He promised us, “**Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them.**” (Matt 18:20) Which means that He is with us every single service, every time we gather in His name. Not in a nebulous, New Age-y way, either, like when people say, “My dead grandma is in my heart.” People say that about the dead, not the living, and Jesus is very much alive! And just because He has a position of honor in heaven, doesn’t mean He can’t also be here on earth. Jesus can step between these two realms, between heaven and earth, as easily we step between rooms of a house. He joins us here in worship, here in this old building that the governor of Wisconsin wouldn’t deign to visit. But the Creator of the universe comes here often.

This is a commonly held error; that because Jesus ascended into heaven, He is trapped there. There are some bad outcomes to this way of thinking: First, people commonly refer to Jesus in the past tense, as if He were dead. He is not. Being in heaven and being dead are not the same thing. The second error is thinking that Christ Jesus cannot be present in the Sacrament of the Altar because His Body and Blood are stuck in heaven and so they can’t be here as well. This teaching originated with Ulrich Zwingli in the 16th Century. He argued that Jesus has a finite, limited body and because He ascended into heaven, He cannot also be present in the Sacrament. Luther famously rejected this argument by insisting that we must accept Christ’s words at face value. During this conference with Zwingli, Luther wrote on the table in chalk, “*Hoc est corpus meum*”, which is the Latin of Matthew 26:26; “**This is My body.**” Luther argued that we must take the words of Jesus seriously, or else we call Him a liar.

A generation later, John Calvin tried to find a middle way between these two views of the Lord’s Supper, between Zwingli’s “memorial meal” and Luther’s “real presence”. What he came up with was no better than Zwingli... but it did have the added bonus of being more confusing. Calvin taught that because Jesus ascended into heaven, we must spiritually ascend there to partake of His body and blood. No, it doesn’t make much sense, but that just proves how important our understanding of the Ascension is, why we must not pick and choose which parts of Scripture we want to believe and which parts we will write off as only “symbolic”. Jesus has not been grounded like a bad boy, stuck in heaven until the Father lets Him out. Jesus is fully God and fully man, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, and He can be in more than one place at a time. He is both present in heaven, in the position of honor that the Father has given Him, and present in the Sacrament, as He said in John chapter 6: “**My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink.**” (v.55)

There is one other overlooked aspect of the Ascension which is important for us. Prior to Christ’s salvific work for us, the vile accuser, Satan, could still approach God in heaven. We sometimes think of heaven as a gated community with a very strict guest list, but Satan – a created angel who originally was obedient to God – was still able to approach the throne of God even after his rebellion. And what did Satan do while in heaven? He accused us before the Father. He accused mankind of not being good enough, of not being worthy, as he did with Job. In Revelation chapter 12 we are

told of the war in heaven in which Satan was cast out forever. When did this war take place? Upon the Ascension of Jesus. It is by the power of His blood that the dragon was finally defeated. So the Ascension marks the beginning of the end for the ancient foe. It marks the start of the war between angels and demons, a battle which we know culminated with the ancient dragon and all his rebellious angels cast out of heaven forever, banned from slandering mankind before God.

In our first reading today, from Acts chapter 1, we have this word of encouragement from the angels who were present at the Ascension. **“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.”** (Act 1:10-11) Just as Jesus ascended with glory, so will He return with glory. He will not sneak back and select some people and leave others behind, wondering and worrying. When He comes again it will be with the fanfare of trumpets, with the noise of a great rushing water, with the choir of all heaven announcing the arrival of the King. Then all who are dead will be raised, no matter where, when or how they died. And all will be judged by the simple test of faith: Do you believe in the Name that is above every name, Jesus who is the Christ?

So you see that this day is not a long, drawn out “good bye” to Jesus. This is the victory celebration of all that He accomplished for us! He has conquered not only death but the devil as well and He alone stands before the Father to serve as our Advocate and Defender. He alone will judge mankind and for those who bear His baptismal seal, for those who confess His name before all the world, He will pronounce the verdict of “Not guilty.” We will be judged by His righteousness and His atonement alone. My fellow redeemed, Jesus ascended for you and He will descend for you. He will feed you and protect you because you are His and when He returns again in glory, we will never have to say goodbye to Him again.

He is risen! He is risen indeed!

In Jesus name, Amen.

Rev. Schopp