

ASCENSION OF OUR LORD

May 13 2018

Old Testament: II Kings 2:5-15

Epistle: Acts 1:1-11

Gospel: Luke 24:44-53

Standing...

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Alleluia—Christ is Risen! **He is risen indeed, Alleluia!**

Risen and ascended,
all for you.

Let us pray. These are Your words Holy Father. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Sitting...

It's always easier to leave—than it is—to be left.

Kids who go off to college,
Military deployments,
Even death itself...

It's always easier to leave—than it is—to be left.

I learned this when my girlfriend, later to become my wife,
left for a year-long mission trip to Russia while we were dating.

I wouldn't wish that on anybody,
which is why I flew to Russia with a ring—to propose.

During the 40 days after His resurrection, Jesus is here and He's over there.

He's wherever He wants to be—

In the Upper Room, on the road to Emmaus, cooking breakfast on the seashore,
showing Himself to hundreds of others as truly a man and really alive,
even after His death.

But then, gathering His disciples to the Mt. of Olives, He tells them—

“...repentance and the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed to all nations...”

He tasks the disciples with, of all things, preaching.

Then raising His nail-scarred hands to bless them,

He is lifted up, and a cloud hides Him from their sight.

Is it easier to leave than to be left?

Maybe so with us, and all of our loved ones, but this...?

This is something is altogether different—something altogether greater.

Now look, I know we're quick to think that the disciples were nothing but a bunch of ignoramuses—just a bunch of hillbillies, whose elevator never goes all the way to the top.

Sure, that's true at times—but cut them some slack...nobody bats 1000.

My point is, here, at this moment, with Jesus ascending in this mysterious cloud—

the same cloud that sat atop Mt. Sinai in the days of Moses...

the same cloud that led the Israelites by day and

filled the interior of the tabernacle so that no one could stand within it...

the same cloud that Isaiah saw in the Temple...

and the same cloud that covered the high mountain where Jesus was transfigured...

It's in this moment that the disciples get it.

They understand exactly what the Ascension means.

How can I say that?

Well, for starters, those three days when Jesus was dead and laying in a tomb, the disciples were a mess—and understandably so.

They were filled with sadness, sorrow and regret.

But now, with His ascension, they don't weep at all.

No tears are shed—no wailing is heard—no mourning is made—

no sackcloth and ashes are worn.

You'd expect this parting to be as sorrowful as the one before, but what do we see? Just the opposite.

The last two verses of our Gospel lesson tell us,

“And they (that's the disciples) worshipped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God.”

The disciples rejoice. They get what we don't.

So, who are the ignoramuses now?

I fear it might be us.

The disciples had a better understating of Jesus' Ascension than we do—
for a couple of reasons.

First, we tend to think that when Jesus left—when He ascended...

He just left this place to go to a better place—

in that He got a job transfer—from earth to heaven,

like George and Whizzy Jefferson,

who moved on up to a deluxe apartment in the sky.

He just went from point A to point B...

If this is the case,

the Ascension of Christ does us little to no good,

and it's certainly not a cause for joy.

Second, when we look around—or God forbid watch the news...what do we see?

We see a world gone completely mad.

The schools are a mess—universities included.

The homosexual and transgender agendas are forced down our throats.

Families are a complete train wreck,

and truth and virtue matter to fewer and fewer people.

Moreover, what happens to us?

We get sick.

We get into accidents.

We are affected by disaster and terror...

And people that we know and love leave the Church.

People that we know and love lose their faith...

It doesn't take long before we're tempted to think that when Jesus ascended,

He left us for good—

leaving us as orphans to fend for ourselves—

Thus, we start believing the one who's in charge...

is the Devil himself.

Beloved, we need to repent.

This is not what the disciples thought...not at all.

For starters,

where Jesus ascends—that being to the right hand of the Father—

that's not a place as we understand "place." Rather, it's an office.

Think about Joseph of old when taken from the dungeon,

to sit at Pharaoh's right hand.

Joseph was still in Egypt.

But all the authority of Pharaoh was given to him.

Here's Joseph—the representative of Pharaoh.

Here's Joseph—the right-hand man of the king.

Here's Joseph—the judge over all the land's provision and life.

Thus, before Joseph, every knee must bow and every tongue must

confess that everyone was utterly dependent upon him.

With Jesus sitting down at the Father's right hand—

Jesus now takes up this office, and as Luther argued...

the right hand of God is wherever God is doing His work.

So, you see, in the Ascension...

Jesus withdraws His visible presence to establish His greater sacramental presence.

Sure—He's hidden, not to be seen with the eyes.

But instead, He's to be heard with the ears.

Meaning the right hand of God is found, not way off somewhere else,

but wherever repentance and forgiveness is proclaimed

in the name of Jesus Christ!

It's wherever God is doing His saving work
through the forgiveness of sins—
at the font of Holy Baptism,
in the Bread and Cup of Holy Communion,
and in the preaching of His Word
and in confession with Holy Absolution.

Beloved, Jesus ascended into heaven,
not to be separated from His Church on earth,
but to work more closely with His Church,
to be present in every place where His Gospel is preached
and His Sacraments are administered.

This by the way, is picked up in the communion liturgy,
when you hear the Pastor say, "Lift up your hearts."

The people respond with what?

"We lift them up unto the Lord."

To where are you lifting them?

You're lifting them to the right hand of the Father.

Where is that?

Wherever God is doing His saving work.

And in that moment in the liturgy, it's at the altar—
where the right hand of God is for you,
hidden in bread and wine—

where Jesus' visible presence
has given way to His greater
sacramental presence.

It's where Jesus promises to be, and you can find Him right there.

Folks, a God that you can't find is not a God worth having.

But this God—

the One who suffered under Pontius Pilate,
who was crucified, died, and was buried,
who descended into Hell,
on the third day He rose again from the dead,
who ascended into Heaven and sits at the right hand of God the
Father Almighty from thence He will come to judge the living and
the dead.

This God can be found—and He wants to be.

Do you remember how on occasion the disciples would ask Jesus,

"Is it at this time you're going to build the kingdom?"

"Is it at this time—huh, huh, huh?" "Tell us!"

The ascension is when Christ builds His kingdom,
not with His own hands or even with His own mouth,

but through the testimony of His witnesses. He tells them...

**you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem,
and in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the end of the earth.**

Regarding the thought of being abandoned, the disciples—
didn't believe that either.

For Jesus explicitly promised them,

“I will not leave you as orphans.”

And on the same day when Jesus ascended He said,

“Go and make disciples of all nations,”

How do you do that?

What's the recipe as it were for making a disciple?

First you baptize them—

in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

You put the thrice holy name of God on them.

Then what?

You teach them to obey all that I have commanded you...

But, that'll take a long time.

It will, but here's the promise, Jesus says,

Behold—pay attention—

I am with you even to the end of the age.”

[Matthew 28:20].

The Ascension of Jesus means that Jesus isn't farther away from them—

Just the opposite. The Ascension puts Him closer. Much closer than ever before.

And as we know, God works great things through these fallible human beings,
and we are the great beneficiaries of their words.

Beloved, this reign of Christ—His session—at God's right hand is a matter of faith.

We can't see it. We can't feel it—yet we confess it.

Don't be guided by your eyes.

Be guided by your ears.

While the non-believers of the world mock those who believe the Bible,

while Muslim fundamentalists murder Christians,

while the world around you appears to be crumbling to pieces,

Christ is actually defeating His enemies and ruling over His Church.

This is not for you to see or figure out.

It's for you to believe.

For your Redeemer,

the very One who died for you and has called you by the

Gospel into His eternal kingdom, the very One who has

proven His love for you, is ruling over everything,

and most importantly His Church.

Thus, you can take heart.

You can have hope—

and you can be of good courage.
Your Jesus, who was on the cross for you,
is at the right hand of God the Father for you as well.

Sure—it might be easier to leave than to be left.
But you have not been left by Christ, not now. Not ever.

In the Holy Name of Jesus, Amen.

Standing...And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.