

Ephesians 4.8

Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord

26 May 2022

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Hallelujah! +

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Scripture for our consideration this evening is written in Ephesians chapter four: "When He ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and gave gifts to men."

Oremus: haec, pater sancte, etc.

It's a perennial surprise to me, this day. Not that it's here. It's not like I haven't been thinking about the Ascension since Easter, really, or maybe a lot longer. Perhaps you have, too.

But what surprises me is that this chief and high feast day of the Holy Christian Church, 40 days to the date after the Resurrection of Our Lord, gets such a small billing.

After all, the enfleshment of our Lord, His incarnation in the womb of the blessed Virgin, gets a huge build-up in Advent and culminates in one of the great holidays not only of the Church, but of our country: Christmas. Work gets called off. Families travel hundreds of miles to be together. And this is after they've spent the better part of a month preparing for it all: houses almost entirely redecorated, presents purchased, meals planned, and the list goes on.

Our Lord's death on Good Friday is also a huge day. Work's not called off—at least not for everyone. But it's one of those big-attendance days when Christians around the world mark and observe the death of the Son of God for the sins of the world.

And of course, there's Easter. Bigger than Good Friday—at least in attendance. While it never requires a day off from work since it falls on a Sunday, it's often just as big a deal as Christmas. There's lamb or ham to be eaten; Easter-egg hunts to be set up and run. Families to be hosted. Houses to be redecorated. Church potluck. You know the drill.

And why is that? Because all of those things: our Lord's incarnation, our Lord's death, our Lord's resurrection—they're all a *really big deal*. In His incarnation He assumed to Himself mortal human flesh so that, though immortal, He may die. He is born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem us who are under the Law. On Good Friday, His birth to die culminates in ... His death. Where, though innocent, He was numbered among sinners for sinners. Where, though He knew no sin, He was made to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. And on Easter, having laid down His life for the sin of the world, He took it up again, victorious over all sins and their power, which is death.

But His Ascension? Doesn't get quite the billing as those other days, does it?

But entirely without justification.

For this day, as St. Paul, writes, "When He ascended on high, He led a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men."

When Paul wrote those words he was alluding to the ancient practice of victorious kings—and it seems to have been practiced across the entire ancient world.

In those days, when a king came home after winning a war, this is what he did: he rode at the front of a long train or parade. Following him were not his victorious troops, but his spoils and the vanquished enemy in chains. The expression of power and might in doing this amazing. The enemy is not just *at* the gate, he's *through* the gate. But captive, he's no threat at all.

That's precisely how Paul depicts our Lord Jesus Christ in His Ascension into heaven. It's not like He's gotten swooped up by angels or by the Father or something like that. It's that, Son of God, He's riding under His own steam back into His heavenly home, returning by His own volition. The King had been out for a spell, waging war. But now He's home.

The first thing you'd see in a Roman triumph would be the triumphant general. A triumphal crown of laurel on his head. His face painted red. Next to him, a slave whispering in his ear: "*Memento mori*: Remember: thou art but mortal."

But in this triumph at the head of the parade rides Jesus Christ Himself. His crown is of thorns. The red stain on His face, the blood of His Passion. And His angel servants do not whisper in His ear, "Remember: thou art but mortal," but sing the song of heaven to Him who was dead, but now lives: "Worthy are You, our Lord and God, to receive glory and power, for You were slain, and by Your blood You ransomed a people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." (Rev. 4.11, 5.9)

Next behind the victorious general came his defeated opponents. King Saul once led Agag the king of the Amalekites behind him. A display to all Israel that it wasn't just a report that their mortal enemy was defeated, but so that they could see it with their own eyes.

In His Ascension the triumphant Lord Jesus Christ led His enemies in tow, too. Right behind Him, the devil. What a joy to see that sight! The devil right in the midst of the kingdom of God, but harmless. And behind the devil, proud death itself, the grim reaper, curled up in a corner of his own cage, weeping over his broken scythe. Completely defanged. And utterly powerless.

Victory was one of the things ancient generals always sought. And so far that's what the divine Ascension parade has been all about. The living conqueror, the Lord Jesus Christ, and defeated death and devil.

For, just as St. Paul says, "When He ascended on high, He led a host of captives."

But war was also always waged for plunder—for gifts to be distributed to the adoring people. After Saul defeated the Amalekites he brought back all their herds—a gift to Israel. Pompey brought back gold and silver coin, gold and silver vessels (Plutarch, *Life of Pompey the Great*, 45). To the delight of the Romans, Julius Caesar led 40 elephants in tow (Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar*, 37.1-2). The year after the sack of Jerusalem, in A.D. 71 Titus and Vespasian counted crowns of gold and precious stones as their trophies, silver, ivory, rich fabrics (Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 7). What a feast for the people of Israel, all the herds of the Amalekites! What security the Roman state could buy for its people with that kind of treasure!

You get the picture. "A host of captives; gifts for men."

In the triumph of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is not gold or silver, elephants or goats, embroidered cloth or ivory. That would be far too cheap a gift. Divine blood is not spilt for that, nor does the Son of God lay down His life for that which will perish, but for eternal goods—for the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life.

The gifts won by the birth, suffering, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ are nothing to snivel at. They are the forgiveness of sins. They are salvation. They are eternal life. But by His incarnation, death, and resurrection He *won* them.

It is in His triumph—in His Ascension into heaven—that He *gave* them.

For now He sits at the right hand of the Father. That's not a physical place. It's the way the Bible talks about the seat of all power. It's where the general goes to give out His gifts.

And from the seat of His power, He sends forth Word and Sacrament and Spirit, pastors and teachers, and gives good gifts to men.

We started this whole thing by talking about the big feasts of the Church—about Christmas, Good Friday, Easter.

How is it that came you to know about them? How is it that you learned what Jesus had done for you in His birth, death, and resurrection?

Only by His Ascension into heaven.

And that's why I'm always surprised by this day. For just little as you'd have a Savior had not Christmas happened. And just as little as you'd not have the forgiveness of sins if Good Friday hadn't happened. And just as little you'd not have eternal life had Jesus not risen from the dead—so little would you have any of them—though you do—had that incarnate, crucified, resurrected Lord Jesus Christ not ascended into heaven, leading a host of captives, and giving gifts to men.

Amen.

pax domini, etc.

jsb
sdg