

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

“And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father.” You confessed those words in the Creed do so, rightly, on a regular basis. Those words confess what the Scriptures reveal to about Jesus and which you heard a few minutes ago, “He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.’ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

What follows this event sums up well not just how the disciples perceived this all but even as you sit here this evening. The ascension is important for them and for you. “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.’”

Sinful flesh assumes a lot of things about the ascension of our Lord because, like the resurrection, it’s something that is so foreign to us. Seeing someone laid into a tomb has a sense of finality to it. You don’t see that person again but at Christians you look with eager anticipation to see him on that glorious day when he and you are raised from the dead. Likewise, when someone goes away, he goes away, he is not constantly present and in your midst. Sure, there are visits and those are wonderful but it’s not a constant presence with you. The ascension of Jesus is not like these experiences in your life.

In the Old Testament reading, Elisha cried out as Elijah is taken to heaven, “And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it and he cried, ‘My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!’ And he saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.” Even though Elisha believed in the resurrection and that he would see Elijah again, there was no promise that Elijah would continue to be with him as he would not go out in his prophetic work.

The ascension of Jesus can be confusing, then, when you let your experience, or your own fallen human reason try to define it and understand it. The ascension can seem like a goodbye when the mind you have toward it is one of the Lord going away and no longer being with his people when you hear those words in the readings today. Yet, what the ascension of Jesus really means is so comforting for the church and you as saints of God. You have the fruits of the Lord’s ascension as he has filled all things and lives and rules as your King.

And that’s the thing, today, your Lord is uplifted in triumph as the crucified and risen Lord. All that has held you captive, sin, death, and the devil, the Lord has made captive and set you free. In Ephesians 4:8, the Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul to write, “When he [Jesus] ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” Salvation has been accomplished and, on this day, you gather as people who are forgiven, free, and heirs of eternal life.

This is the Gospel that Jesus sent out the apostles to preach. In the Gospel reading Jesus said, “‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.’”

The apostles were being sent out to give Christ and his benefits to his people. Repentance and the forgiveness of sins, law and gospel, would be their proclamation to all nations. In ten days, the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon them

The Ascension of our Lord—May 18, 2023

at Pentecost. He didn't send them out alone but went with as did the name of and the whole Trinity would go and work through them and God's people. Jesus was with them even as he had shown them that all things were fulfilled in him.

Jesus gives you the promise that he is with you always. He is present with you in your life and present for you. Though you no longer see him with your eyes like the disciples did, that doesn't mean he isn't present with you. And this isn't some spiritual warm thought but a very real and concrete presence. In the reading from Acts the Lord was overshadowed by a cloud. "A cloud took him out of their sight." He is out of sight but still near to you and is at the right hand of the Father. Can he be both places? Yes, he can because he is God. Is he present only in his divinity? No, the two natures, his human and divine, are united together. Where he is in his divine nature, he is also present in his human nature. His whole person as the Son of God is present in your life always. And, as if that wasn't enough, he tells you where you find him present for you and your forgiveness, life, and salvation. The means of grace, the word and the sacraments, are where your Lord promises to be present and present for you.

Jesus is also at the right hand of the Father interceding for you. This also means that he's there in his humanity. The flesh and blood of a man, sinless and glorified, is at the right hand of God praying for you. Jesus is your brother in the faith whose blood pleads your case before the throne of God and who prays for you as your mediator. In some ways, then, the wonder and glory of Ascension Day is the wonder and glory of the incarnation. There's comfort in knowing your Lord, the Son of God, is at the Right hand of the Father and he is for you. The same human flesh and blood which was in the womb of the Virgin Mary, lived a perfect obedient life, died on the cross, and is risen from the grave is the same Lord who is at the Right hand of the Father praying for you and ruling his Church with his word and sacraments.

All of this comes to a head in your life. Take for example, this evening. Here you are hearing this word of God and your Lord is with you. He fills all things and is here now. He has led the captives of sin, death, and the devil and has accomplished your salvation. Now he has called you his own in the baptismal waters. He has gathered you together in his church. And he rules and governs you which his mercy forgiving you and giving you eternal life. And yes, he even gives you his own true body and true blood given and shed for you. This same Lord who ascended and went out of sight of the apostles is the same Lord who is here for you right now. Jesus lifted up his pierced hands and blessed the apostles and he does the same for you.

Rejoice then, this Day of Ascension because Jesus is with you, and you are his. He also promises you this day that he is coming again. The angel preached this to the apostles as they look dumbfounded at all they saw. "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." Jesus is coming again. The day will come when you see him face to face no longer in veiled means. That day is promised to you on this day as well. Ascension Day is also a day of preaching to you that the Lord is coming again in great glory.

Luke's Gospel account ends today with these words, "And they [the apostles] worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God." The disciples did leave this sight with joy and you can leave this place tonight in that same joy. You have the Sacramental presence of Jesus. You have the Scriptures opened to you. You have the gift and promise of the Father in the Holy Spirit. The ascended Lord is with you always in the baptizing, teaching, and Lord's Supper of his church. He is here for you until the end of time. So rejoice here in this temple, this church, and keep coming back to where your ascended Lord has promised to be for your Lord invites you to be here and to shower you with his gifts.

Ascension Day is a day of comfort. Confess boldly, "And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father." Know what this is all means as you speak those words and what this all means. It's a day for you to rejoice in your Lord who is near and is yours now and forever.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.