

THE EFFECTS OF CHRIST'S ASCENSION

Dear Friends in Christ,

As a child growing up in the 50's and 60's, I remember when the launching a rocket into space, especially a rocket with astronauts inside, was considered a matter of national interest. All three television networks would carry the event live. First there would be the countdown, "5, 4, 3, 2, 1...lift off!" As the rocket struggled to escape earth's grip, the sound was deafening and those who were present said the ground would shake under their feet.

As exciting as it was to watch a rocket blast off from its pad, it's not a thrill that lasted very long. After a couple of minutes the cameras would lose sight of the ship leaving the networks with no reason to broadcast from the launch pad. Attention would turn to the astronauts and their mission. The launch of the rocket was only the beginning of the endeavor. The real excitement would come when the rocket reached its orbit and the astronauts would begin their work, rendezvousing, docking, taking space walks, launching satellites, working on experiments in zero gravity.

Although there was no smoke or the deafening sound of explosive rocket engines, Jesus' ascension into heaven was just as impressive. The disciples celebrated the event and continued to do so even after they returned from the launch pad outside Jerusalem. Like Mission Control which can celebrate when a rocket reaches orbit because it can now do what it has been sent to do, the disciples rejoiced at Jesus' ascension because they knew that his ascent to the right hand of God would impact their lives in a positive way. Jesus' ascension continues to impact us in a positive way today. Let's look at the effects of Jesus' Ascension for his disciples and for us. From today's Gospel Lesson, we listen again to Luke 24, verses 50 & 51.

⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.

There must be many late nights of worry for scientists who prepare an experiment which is included on a space mission. If the experiment is a flop, there will be a lot of disappointment and the years of planning will have seemed wasted. The hours that followed Jesus' crucifixion were filled with disappointment for the disciples. They had dedicated three years of their lives to following one they thought could make a difference

in Israel. But now he was dead and those who had killed Jesus would probably come after them too so the disciples huddled together behind locked doors. Had they been part of a failed “experiment”? Jesus had died, yes, but he would come back to life and the disciples should have known that. When the resurrected Jesus appeared to them he said: *“This is what I told you while I was still with you. Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms... This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day”* (Luke 24:44, 46b).

Oh, how we Christians suffer needlessly when we don’t take to heart God’s Word! Those hours after Jesus’ crucifixion should have been ones of anticipation, not disappointment and fear. The disciples should have camped out at Jesus’ tomb to catch the resurrection spectacle, the way concert-goers camp out at the ticket window so they can snap up the good tickets. The disciples must have kicked themselves later for not being there to witness the angel wrenching open the empty tomb.

What part of God’s Word are you tempted to ignore and how do you suffer as a result? For example God invites you to cast all of your anxieties on him but do you instead bottle up your concerns, your fears, your doubts, your uncertainties, your cares until you’ve managed to concoct a mean brew of apprehension and anxiety that’s just as hazardous to your health as a night of excessive drinking?

What’s the remedy? How can we learn to trust God’s Word better? Jesus scolded his disciples for not believing God’s Word regarding his resurrection. Luke tells us what Jesus did next. ⁴⁵ *Then he (Jesus) opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.* This was the first fulfillment of a promise Jesus had given to his disciples. Jesus had promised that after he went to heaven he would send the Holy Spirit who would open their minds to understand Scripture. (John 16:13-14).

We all need the Holy Spirit because as the Apostle Paul explained in his first letter to the Corinthians:

¹⁴ *The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.* (1 Corinthians 2:14 NIV).

Someone in whom the Holy Spirit has not worked, i.e., an unbeliever, can’t understand the words, the thoughts, the messages that come from the Spirit of God. Those things are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them. Even if you are the smartest person in the world, without the Spirit of God you still would not be able to understand or

accept the truth of God's Word. It would be like trying to read a newspaper in a language you don't understand.

So this is one important effect of Jesus' Ascension. When he ascended into heaven, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit. Because of the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts, now we can understand and believe God's Word and God's promises. Believing God's promises will lead you to a life that is more and more free of worry, anxiety, doubts and uncertainties.

But the promised Holy Spirit would do more for the disciples than merely give them knowledge; he gave them power. Listen to what Jesus told his disciples.

⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Jesus wasn't going to leave his disciples with a picture of himself, a lock of his hair, or a relic from his cross. He gave them something better, divine power through the gift of the Holy Spirit. So what were the disciples to do with this power? Jesus told them:

⁴⁷ . . . repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached . . . to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

While the disciples had at first thought of themselves as members of a witness protection program hiding in locked rooms, Jesus' ascension and the promise of the Holy Spirit made them aware that they were to be a part of the witness proclamation program. And proclaim they did! When the disciples returned to Jerusalem after Jesus' lift off, they didn't go back into hiding; they went daily to the temple courts where they praised God for all to see. What made the difference? Jesus' ascension made the difference.

So what kind of witnesses for Jesus are we, the members of Grace Lutheran Church? If you're keeping a low profile as a Christian, if you act as if you're part of some witness protection program, it may be because you don't understand the effects of Jesus' ascension. Jesus' ascension wasn't his retirement. It was his re-coronation as King of the universe.

How would you feel if a close friend of yours was elected President? You'd feel important. You'd feel connected. You'd feel like an "insider." You'd maybe even expect to receive a few perks wouldn't you? Access to the White House, an invitation to a Presidential party, a ride on Air Force One. Well you have it even better than that with Jesus. He doesn't just

give you a few perks. He gives you everything you need. Here's how the Apostle Paul explained it in Ephesians 1:

²² “God placed all things under his (Jesus’) feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.

With Jesus ruling all things, there is no need for you to be timid. You can be a bold witness for Christ. The job of a witness is to tell what he or she has seen and heard. You may need to step out of your “comfort zone” but that’s what unselfish, sanctified, motivated, soul-loving, concerned believers do. But now what exactly is it that you are to witness to others? It’s nothing more than God’s Word: the simple law and the simple gospel. Jesus said it this way:

⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations,

Repentance, that’s the law. For example, . . . *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God . . .* (Romans 3:23 NIV). Every person is a sinner in need of a savior, a sinner in need of repentance. Can you say that to an unchurched friend, an unchurched neighbor, an unchurched family member? You can if you are really concerned for their soul, for their eternal salvation. *Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached . . .* Forgiveness of sins, that’s the gospel. For example, Ephesians 1:7 (NIV)

In him (Jesus) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins,

Jesus’ death pays for our sins. Through faith in Jesus we have forgiveness for all sin. Now maybe you’re thinking, “Oh, I could never do that! I could never tell my spouse, I could never tell my son that he’s a sinner in need of a savior.” Why not? If you don’t point out the seriousness of their situation now, God will on Judgment Day and it will be too late for that person to turn to Jesus for forgiveness.

We are certain that we have forgiveness through faith in Jesus because his Ascension guarantees it. Had Jesus not conquered sin and death, he would not have walked out of his tomb and he would not have been welcomed back into heaven as a conquering king. Since Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, you can be certain that his mission to wash us clean of all sin was accomplished. Through faith, Jesus forgives us all!

Because you have forgiveness, you have eternal life! You can be certain of all this because of Jesus’ Ascension. He has ascended to rule over all things for your good. And even though he has ascended to heaven he hasn’t left you because we’re told that he

now fills the universe with his presence. And as if that's not enough, he clothes you with the Holy Spirit who gives you understanding of his Word which can lead to a worry-free and power-filled life, a worry-free and power-filled life witnessing the effects of Jesus' Ascension. Amen.