

WE CELEBRATE THE LORD'S ASCENSION

Alleluia to our Risen and Ascended Lord!

Our text for today's message is the Gospel Lesson assigned to the Day of Ascension. From Luke 24, we listen again to verse 51:

While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Jesus ascended into heaven 40 days after his Resurrection from the dead. On the fortieth day after that first Easter Sunday, Jesus led his disciples out of Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives, near the town of Bethany. There, as he was blessing his disciples, he lifted up and rose into the sky until a cloud hid him from the disciples' sight. This is an historical fact. It really happened. And it is an important event in the life of Jesus. It is the third of the five steps or stages of Jesus' Exaltation that we confess every time we recite the Apostles' Creed.

1. He descended into hell.
2. The third day he rose again from the dead.
- 3. He ascended into heaven**
4. and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
5. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Yes, this was an important event for Jesus, but why is it important for you and me today, almost 2,000 years after the fact? The Ascension of Jesus into heaven is worthy of our celebration today because it assures us that he has:

1. fulfilled his mission for us, and
2. he reigns eternally for us.

1. We Celebrate The Lord's Ascension because he has fulfilled his mission for us.

A lot can happen in six weeks. The disciples could testify to that. Six weeks earlier, late on the night of the Thursday we call Maundy Thursday, the disciples thought it was all over. Jesus had been arrested. They had all scattered. Then the news got worse. Jesus was condemned. Jesus was crucified. Jesus lay dead in the tomb.

They had thought he was the Messiah, a king. But what kind of king would suffer such cruelty? Who would honor such a weak and helpless king? Jesus appeared to have failed. *"He was led like a lamb to the slaughter . . . he was cut off from the land of the living"* (Isaiah 53:7, 8 NIV). The disciples were without their leader, confused and mournful and scared that they would be the next to go.

But what happened to Jesus, happened to him according to his will and plan. This had been God's promise ever since Adam and Eve had sinned. The offspring or seed of the woman would have his heel struck as he crushed Satan's head (Genesis 3:15).

But the disciples couldn't see Satan's power crushed and crumbled. They saw Jesus dead. They saw his mission a failure, or so they thought. Even after Jesus showed himself alive again, even after they had touched his resurrected body, even after they had witnessed that the same Jesus who was nailed to the cross still bore the nail marks, the same Jesus who had definitely died, that same Jesus

was alive, risen from the dead – even then, they didn't fully understand that all this was part of his mission. He had not failed, he had fulfilled his mission.

Since they didn't understand, the risen Jesus reminded them that he had explained all this to them before it happened. He opened their minds so that they could put two and two together and see that all that had happened was exactly as God's Word, recorded in the Old Testament (the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms), had said.

⁴⁴ *He said to them, "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."* ⁴⁵ *Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. "*

Jesus had not failed. He had fulfilled his mission. What was that mission? Jesus had plainly told his disciples earlier: *"The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost"* (Luke 19:10 NIV). Jesus was talking about you and me and all people when he said, "What was lost." You and I and all people were at one time lost in sin. As we were born into this world, sin ruled in our hearts. The devil and our sinful nature were our slave drivers. They are still powerful forces. Just look how easily we still fall into sin even though we believe in Jesus. Like the disciples right after Jesus' death, we easily begin to wonder how God's promises can be true when we see evil happening around us and to us. It leads us to worry or self-pity or anger. "Where's God when I really need him?" "I thought God promised to help us!"

Jesus' mission was to seek and to save what was lost. How did he do that? He did it exactly as God's Word had said he would. ⁴⁶ *He (Jesus) told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,* ⁴⁷ *and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations . . ."*

That's what Jesus did for you. He left his heavenly throne and came to seek you. He came into our sin-darkened world to save us by his suffering and dying. As True God and True Man, he saved you by suffering the penalty for your sins, and in exchange crediting you with his sinless life. His blood pays for your sin. His resurrection declares you forgiven.

This Good News, the message of forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus is to be preached to all nations. Jesus said to his disciples, ⁴⁸ *You are witnesses of these things.* Surprise! The disciples had, at first, thought of themselves as members of a witness protection program, hiding behind locked doors. But 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' ascension, 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 you? If you're keeping a low profile as a Christian, as if you were part of some witness protection program, it may be because you don't understand Jesus' ascension. Jesus' ascension wasn't his retirement, it was his re-coronation as King of the universe. As the Apostle Paul explains *"God placed all things under his (Jesus') feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church."* (Ephesians 1:22 NIV). With Jesus ruling all things, there's no need to be timid. You can be a bold witnesses for Christ. He has fulfilled his mission and he's in control.

2. We Celebrate The Lord's Ascension because He reigns eternally over everything.

Jesus ascended into heaven to reign over all things with his almighty power. 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.* As the eternal Son of God, Jesus has always reigned as King over all things with his almighty power. But his ascension shows that he now reigns over all, not only as true God but also as true man. The God-Man rules as our ascended King, the God who understands us because he became one of us.

He reigns over you and me, not only with his almighty power but also through his gracious word. His rule is in the hearts of believers. Faith in Jesus makes us part of his eternal kingdom. This world and all its kingdoms will pass away. But Jesus' kingdom will never pass away. On the Last Day, Jesus will visibly return in glory. And his kingdom that now lives unseen within our hearts will become visible forever and ever. And we who suffer here for his name's sake will reign in heaven with him in glory.

Jesus' ascension reminds us that he is right now with us as our king who reigns eternally over everything. Just as he lifted his hands in blessing for his disciples so also he is blessing you and me. We read that the disciples ⁵² . . . *worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.* ⁵³ *And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.* In the same way, Jesus' ascension leads us to worship him with great joy and to witness to others the great things God has done for us through Jesus.

In reality, things often seem to be the opposite. So often our lives don't seem to be victorious. So often in today's world we suffer ridicule and contempt when we try to tell others about Jesus. We fall prey to the same sicknesses, the same tragedies, the same problems that confront others.

When you see these happening to you and feel the temptation to get angry or be fearful, to give up or to give in to worry, remember your ascended King. Even though the world around you denies him, he truly reigns over all. Even when you feel helpless and wonder why such things happen to you, your King is taking care of you. You may not see his hand beneath you lifting you up, protecting you. But by faith you know it is there. As your ascended King he rules over all things for your good.

He has already given his life for you. He has ascended to heaven in victory, and his victory is your victory. No matter what others say or do, no matter what disasters befall you, no matter how little you have, you can be content. You can be happy. You can be joyful. Your ascended King has won the victory for you. You will reign with him in heaven forever. So what does it matter what others say or do in the short time that is your earthly life? You can celebrate His ascension and worship your ascended King as you live a life that overflows with his forgiveness and his joy. The joy we have in our ascended Lord never ends. He has fulfilled his mission – his mission to save lost sinners like you and me. He rules eternally over everything so that we can live in joy and happiness now and forever. Amen.