

2024 Ascension Day

Jesus ascends into heaven forty days after easter. Luke and Acts record this account outside Jerusalem where he was lifted up and veiled by a cloud. The disciples stand there looking up, amazed, and an angel shows up, “Why are you looking up?” And we all want to respond, “because they just saw a man flying!” How many of us have been looking up, trying to glimpse the northern lights recently? Why are we looking up? Because it’s amazing, and imagine this, the Risen Lord ascending – of course they would look up! But before they can say that the angel simply states, as is prophesied, “He will return again the same way.” As if to say, “This should be no surprise to you, this is part of the plan, as will be his return.”

Forty days after easter puts us at last Thursday, the feast of the Ascension. It was, historically, one of the highest festivals of the Church year. Proclaiming Jesus’ exalted glory, the success of his mission, and him taking back his rightful seat at the right hand of the Father. It also signals the imminent promised coming of the Holy Spirit. So it is truly right to remember the ascension and offer all praise to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, indeed.

But I have a confession: there is a part of me that is kind of embarrassed by the ascension. I shouldn’t be, again, this is a confession. I get embarrassed because it is a certainly convenient response when asked a question like, “Well if Jesus is alive, where is he?” A question I have been asked numerous times by the children here, and they are inquisitive, and I have no problem proclaiming to them the good news that he is back on his throne so he can speak for their good and the good of the whole world. Amen!

But if a *cynic* asks, “Where is this Jesus of yours?” Ascension seems to feel like you are answering, “Oh, well, about that, he disappeared, flew away to heaven.” “Realllly?” And we get

uncomfortably close to, “Well those gold tablets, well I just lost them so no I can’t show them to you, but trust me they are real!”

In an age that demands evidence, the ascension is the day when some of the evidence goes away. The body or rather, more specifically, the incarnational (riding and talking *in the car* with you) presence of the Son, goes away.

Now before we leave aghast at this sermon, or doubting our faith, let’s note a few things.

The witnesses of the resurrection are far more than, say, the plates which could not be read by anyone but one person – whether they were seen or not we can debate, but even if they were they couldn’t be read. But this is not the case with our Risen Lord. No, Jesus rose and he ate, and drank, and touched, and talked. Those happened, those people knew who it was they saw, Jesus of Nazareth - that title links him to a place and time - a real person alive again! Of which certainly no dead body was found. That’s for sure.

Furthermore, we have evidence for these witnesses, namely the 12, and can find their testimony, under penalty of death, sound. Yet even these 12, could they account for the vast, vast, sweeping growth and confession of a Risen Lord all over the empire and beyond? No, I think more than just 12 took the testimony of a Risen Lord around the world. So take heart, we have good reason to believe what we do.

But let’s focus for a minute on something I mentioned there: the testimony going “around the world.”

If Jesus remains – doesn’t ascend into heaven - If he remains in his risen and exalted state as we see after his resurrection – he’s healed, he’s whole, he is omnipotent and omnipresent appearing behind locked doors. If he is exercising that power, it is entirely possible for him to give his gifts

in Word and Sacrament around the world even as he remains... But where does he remain? In Jerusalem? And how does that happen? How will the kings interact with him? Is he giving advice? Is he commanding? Are they fighting him? Does he need his legions now because I don't think Herod or Caesar are going willingly? Does he use his divine power to get rid of all other earthly authorities? But then we are kind of at "the end" right then aren't we? And so many, again around the world, had yet to hear his saving work... so that doesn't work. And isn't his kingdom not of this world and beyond the "trivialities" of nations and empires (yes God still is in control of those – we call that the left hand kingdom) but that's my point: His Strong, Right Hand kingdom is it not for the lowly, the meek, the sinner, to grant them eternal life and salvation? Yes THIS is why he came. And I daresay, why he "left." He even says it himself in John 16 "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." He ascended so that the gifts of salvation might not be linked to one location, but spread around the world and by the Power of the Holy Spirit, reach the untimely born, the lowly, the unexpected. You and me.

"But Pastor you said he could do that even while remaining." True enough. But would that be how we viewed it? Could we say that the lowly, poor child who is too unwell or unable to afford a plane ticket to go see the King, receives every single bit as much grace as the person who can go see him?

I hope we can say "yes, he does," because God's gifts and presence in Word and Sacrament are that strong, but doesn't that show the point then, that an earthly reign of his isn't necessary for our salvation? Furthermore, if he had a headquarters somewhere, we wouldn't say that we all get his gifts evenly. Not at all. The "good Christians" would go travel there and see him, "Why wouldn't you, don't you care?" And so now there is a burden of pilgrimage that all "real"

Christians would feel. And when you pilgrimage there, what are you asking for? Anyone asking for healing, bread? It would come up.

And is he a bread king? Just here to solve a few of our temporal problems? Or does he have a plan to bring eternal healing and sustenance to the world! – A much bigger picture? And folks these are the same reasons why a millennial reign of his after we “rebuild the temple” before he comes back (what a third time?) are just as ludicrous.

That is not the Church he made. The Church he made goes around the world with his gifts. And so Yes, His leaving, his ascension is a part of that plan! And, if you are sitting there wondering, “it seems like the ascension is a matter of logistics”: well, yeah, it is. This is why in our Gospel lesson he says he is sending the disciples out. And they will walk on real roads, and speak to real people, about a real risen Savior. It’s why, immediately after the ascension, the very first thing they do is logistically fill the number of apostles. And they don’t just pick people off the street, they have requirements, they had to have been with the Risen Lord from the Baptism to the ascension – there it is again. We can’t meet those requirements anymore, which means we are no longer filling the office of Apostle. We have their testimony to proclaim, yes, yes we do. And we have the New Testament preaching office that we fill to ensure that testimony is shared. And even more we send it out on braille sheets, and bibles, and on the internet - logistics. That the world may hear the news of a Risen Savior and receive his gifts just as richly as anyone else.

So yes, it is logistics – a part of God’s plan to save the world. Which means it is deeper, of course, than just business plans or advertising. It is the heart of God for the world. It is his desire for all to be saved. It is his guarding and strengthening when that word is rejected. That’s right, he says “they hated me, they will hate you.” And yet the call is still to go forth. Because his heart is still for that world that hates him – such is his love.

So the Lord ascends, sends the Spirit and the Church... goes...

So God's gifts might, by the Spirit's Work, bring truth, comfort, joy, and eternal life to even that one person that seems so unlikely, so sinful, so lost, so broken, so angry... so that his gifts might come to even you! So the lowly and the sinner might know that they are not second rate but loved and valued just as much as any other.

And we are not immune to that sin either, thinking there are second rate Christians. "Man you really need to go to Israel, the Bible comes alive!" And you know what, it's kind of true. It was amazing. And of course there are the jokes "Don't send your pastor to Israel he will never shut up about it again." And I am guilty of that aren't I? But by me flying over there, did I receive any special grace that you do not have here?

Not one bit.

And thank Ascension day for that. His gifts are yours, completely. And the poor, sick child's as well. And the people we think are "fake" Christians, and, yes, sadly, there are those playing a part, but you don't know mustard seeds or flickering wicks or bruised reeds, God does and he proclaims the least are the greatest. So be careful... The ascension teaches us that our Lord has gone to speak on our behalf, who are we to speak against one another then – unless his Word reveals it to us to exhort or mark and avoid. So be careful, "You are a believer but have you put him on the throne of your heart yet?" Ugh! No! Ascension puts him on the actual throne of heaven and earth! And all who believe in him receive his gifts. Thank Ascension day for that.

And may we be a people who encourage one another with those truths. That we have a crucified and risen Savior, who is ascended and given us his gifts, his word, his Spirit. There we find all

that is needed for salvation even a half a world away. Even with our sins, even with our failures, even with our fears, even with our doubts.

Ascension Day proclaims that our Savior lives, he reigns, and he is interceding for your good and your salvation even now before the Father. Wiping away the devil's accusations that you might stand, even as you are, really, actually are, redeemed, perfect and clean. Because blood shed on a cross far away, long ago, still testifies to your salvation in the actual throne room of God. Even as his omnipotent presence is here where two or more are gathered, and his bodily presence is there in communion according to his omnipotent word, and lo, he is with us to the end of the age. This is our Savior, ascended, exalted, glorified, that more might be saved by His Work.

And so hopefully we, or I, can begin to see the ascension of our Lord as not just a departure of evidence, or a fairy tale, or something random. But as a part of his plan of salvation for the world, that actually helps accomplish that plan. A plan that you, by name, are a part of. Thanks be to God. Amen.