

Ascension
Luke 24:44-53

We Joyfully Give Attention to Christ's Ascension

Christmases are merry. Birthdays are happy. Anniversaries are golden. What are Ascension celebrations? Happy Ascension? Merry Ascension? Have a golden Ascension Day? None of those phrases sound quite right, because none of those phrases are at all common in everyday conversation. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen an Ascension greeting card. I remember thinking while I was growing up, that the real name for Ascension was: "What? There's church tonight?" Why, here at St. John's, we don't even have a separate midweek Ascension Service.

Even though we are celebrating the Ascension of Our Lord four days early, we have still gathered together today to celebrate Christ's return—as true man and true God—to the glories of his heavenly kingdom. But is that something that we are inclined to celebrate? Perhaps not... Could it be, just maybe, that Ascension doesn't rank up there with Christmas and Easter (as it ought!) because if you and I had our choice, we would have chosen for Christ to hang around for a while longer on earth. Then, just maybe, we could get a good look at Jesus, perhaps have a conversation with him, maybe even go out fishing with him and get to know him a bit. But that is not the way Christ works. If Christ remained on earth, that would have tempted us to give our faith an earthly focus—and we are all already way too good at focusing on earthly things! No. Christ ascended into heaven, to give us full confidence that we one day join him in heaven. Christ has ascended heavenward, giving our faith a heavenly focus. It's true: at his Ascension, Jesus withdrew his visible presence from his people. But that doesn't mean that Ascension is all about so-long, fare-well, auf wiedersehen, goodbye! Ascension is all about Jesus saying "*Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age!*" (Matthew 28:20)

And this is the message of Ascension Day. That name comes from this event spoken of in our gospel lesson, heard about in our readings, sung in our hymns so far, and observed 40 days after Easter. The name of the day tells us what it is all about. But the meaning of Ascension can be summed up with two words: He's here! We joyfully give attention to Christ's Ascension. It was his last appearance of resurrection. It began his universal presentation.

I. It was his last appearance of resurrection

This is the last resurrection appearance of our Savior. The first part of our lesson took place on Easter Sunday. Jesus had spent some time with the two guys on the road to Emmaus, and now they came running back to the apostles to tell them that they had spoken with Jesus, the risen, living One. Then Jesus appeared in their midst. He even asked for something to eat just to show that he was not a ghost, not some kind of fantasy figure or dream. Then he instructed them so they could put all this together... the things that had happened the past few days. "*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.'* Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "*This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things*" (44-48).

Then Jesus gave the promise of Pentecost that we will celebrate in two weeks. There is a gap of 40 days between Easter and Ascension. The same Luke who writes this gospel writes to Theophilus: *“He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God”* (Acts 1:3). This event is called “Ascension” because Jesus literally rose up from this earth until a cloud made it impossible for them to see him any more. *“When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven”* (50-51).

Have you ever wondered what the purpose of Ascension is? In the life of Christ, this is one of the three most important events, and yet it doesn't seem that important to many Christians. It might even be difficult to gather a large crowd at church on Ascension Day. The creed that we often recite reminds us: “He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” St. Paul, writing to the Philippians, lets us in on what this is all about: *“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (2:9-11). Paul reminds us: *“It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose”* (2:13).

This is why we joyfully give attention to the ascension. It marks the return of Jesus to full glory. Did that shake your seat a little? No? Then wrap your mind around this: Jesus picked up the crown of king of the universe. All heaven must have celebrated as he returned to the power, majesty, splendor, and honor that was rightfully his. He had set it aside when he took on the job of paying for our sins beginning with his conception and birth all the way to the cross, there dying for our sins and guilt.

Six weeks ago we gathered early in the morning to excitedly sing together about the center of our joy, the resurrection, the proof that Jesus had indeed paid for our sins. The resurrection really had an impact on the disciples. Did you notice how sad they were, how hopeless, fearful, ready to give up? Easter took all that sadness away. But there was still a problem. You caught it right away when Mary Magdalene grabbed hold of Jesus' feet and would not let him go. Thomas had some of it in him when he said that he wanted to put his fingers in the nail prints and put his hand in the hole in his side. They wanted to see him, to touch him, to hold him, to never let him go. And Easter made that feeling all the more intense. Now they knew he was the Savior, the Son of God, now, more than ever. They did not want to let him out of their sight.

Well, just think about that for a moment. What would happen if we announced to the newspapers and the TV media every day next week that Jesus Christ would be here in person next Sunday? First, I would guess that every person who is a member and who ever has been a member would make it a point to cancel golf games, trips to Disney, late night out Saturday night, trips to the beach and whatever else God's people let come between their worship of him and their hearts. But it would have a bigger impact than that. Even if the media would make a mockery of all this, you could still figure on crowds in the thousands. And if it were presented by the media as serious, there would be millions trying to get in here. What would you do if he were to make a visible appearance? I know what I would do: I would barely be able to keep my mouth shut like the apostles at his ascension, gaping up into heaven.

But there certainly would be other problems. Think about this: Everyone who had an illness would be trying to touch him, to get him to notice him or her. We'd be asking him to bless our children, to solve our problems, to talk to the president, make that relative come to

church with us, stop the wars, alleviate hunger... why, the requests would never stop coming. But the problem is that even if every one of us would only get 20 seconds with Jesus, that would mean that only about a million and a half people a year would get some time with him since there are only 24 hours per day. The rest of the 7 billion people in the world would have to wait, most never getting even a second with Jesus.

That would really be a problem for everybody, but not for Jesus. You see, all during those 40 days he was appearing to the disciples sometimes individually, sometimes in bunches up to 500 at a time. Those appearances were to assure them that he really did conquer death, was alive, and going to send them the Holy Spirit in a very special way so that the Church could get started off with a bang.

But when Jesus wasn't appearing to the disciples, where was he then? When he was teaching on this earth, he would stay with the disciples, sometimes sleeping out in the wilderness desert, sometimes staying at friends' homes, but he was always around visibly. Not so after Easter. That gives us the insight we need to understand the Ascension. You see, all during those 40 days, Jesus was going in and out of glory. He passed through walls, appeared, disappeared, even perhaps, changed appearance slightly. That was to let the disciples know that something very big was in the process. It started with the cross when that gigantic payment for the world's sins was paid. We are talking here about things on a scale we cannot comprehend. The resurrection signaled that Christ was the Savior, and also true God, in control of everything, even over death and hell.

And now, the ascension signals that everything Jesus had come to do on this earth was completed. That includes sacrificing his life, but it also includes the convincing of the disciples and the world that he was who he said he was: true God, and the only hope this world: you and I and all the rest have, of living forever.

Now it is time for Jesus' work to enter the new phase, operating totally from glory. There would be no more visible appearances again until the final one, when he returns in that glory and splendor at the end of time as Judge over the entire world. Ascension was the last of Jesus' resurrection appearances. It also began his universal presentation.

II. It began his universal presentation

Now presentation isn't a real word. It isn't a spelling mistake for presentation; I made it up to rhyme with ascension. The point was to emphasize the fact that Jesus is present. His presence is here. Jesus is literally here. I say "literally." We are not talking here in terms of imagination or wishes or things like that. Jesus is here. He is also everywhere else. And that is why there had to be an ascension. For Jesus to hear your prayers and my prayers and a billion other prayers, he had to be omnipresent and omniscient. Of course, he was that as the Son of God, but he put much of it aside, kind of like putting it on a shelf, during his time on the earth. Now he takes that all back.

We can tell that the disciples understood: "*Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God*" (52-53). Notice the worship and the joy! It had finally come to them that this was the last time they would see Jesus on this earth, but that there would never be a time when he would not see them, nor would there ever be a time when they could not talk to him, knowing full well that he was listening just as intently as he listened to their last question before he switched modes. Instead of clinging to him, instead of being fearful and confused and upset when he ascended, they

worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Their joyful worship just kept on. There was excitement because Jesus ascended, not the gloom of Good Friday night. And now all the promises of Jesus made sense: *“Surely, I am with you always... For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them... my presence will go with you, and I will give you rest... this is my body... this is my blood.”*

Think what this means: Jesus is literally here this morning according to his own promise. Sometimes you can feel his presence. But that is sometimes an emotional thing. What’s so awesome now is that whether we feel him or not, he is still here because he made us the promise that he would. And he is able to keep all his promises. The reality is that Jesus has taken up his omnipresence—his ability to be everywhere in the universe as true God. The Bible tells us that he fills heaven and earth. He was so big that he made this world, but that means that he is bigger than the world.

The only problem is that we are not yet in glory. And that means that we cling to Jesus boldly now by faith, neither by sight, nor by hanging on to him in paralyzing fear that he might leave us (as Mary did). Now we can confidently go out in this world, deal with everything that our sin, this sinful world, Satan, and all the rest throw at us, knowing that there is not a time ever where we are alone. Jesus is here right between us, around us, above us, and below us, right here, right now.

“Good night, good night, parting is such sweet sorrow,” These words from Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet* capture the idea that many lovers, many friends, many family members have felt when having to separate from one another for a time. The phrase, “parting is such sweet sorrow” has torn emotions, when two kindred spirits are separated from one another it is sorrowful, and yet the departure reminds the people what they do share with each other. I’m sure that everyone of us in this room has experienced a departure of some sort, whether it’s saying goodbye to a loved one who is getting deployed, to dropping your kids off at school, or even when friends from far away come to visit and then depart. Saying “goodbye,” can be difficult, and it was no different for Jesus’ disciples as they said “goodbye” to Jesus when he ascended into heaven.

But Jesus did not want his disciples to feel sad that he was leaving them, because he wasn’t. It’s true, with his ascension, Jesus removed himself bodily and visibly from his people, but he is far from being apart from us. At the end of Matthew’s gospel Jesus says, *“And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20). Amen.