

THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD [B]

Acts 1:1-11; St. Luke 24:44-53
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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Alleluia! Christ is risen! ***He is risen indeed! Alleluia!***

Departures are often not easy for us. It could be a youngster heading off to college, or a young man or woman leaving for the military, or a new job across the country, saying goodbye to loved ones who no longer live nearby. Or even more difficult — saying farewell to a family member or close friend who has died. Loved ones depart, and we experience a profound emptiness and sadness.

But today, rather than ***grieve*** a departure, we ***celebrate*** our Lord's Ascension into heaven. In his Gospel and in the book of Acts, St. Luke tells us that the Lord Jesus led his disciples out as far as Bethany, on the slope of the Mount of Olives, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them, and while he was blessing them, he was "*lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight*" (Acts 1:9).

We might think Christ's departure — his ascension — would be like the times when we bid farewell to a loved one. Jesus, the disciples' companion, teacher and Savior, had been with them through difficulties and trials. He had preached to them, and eaten with them. He had worked miracles in their midst, and indeed, they had lost him once already, to death, on Good Friday.

But then, they had the incredible ***joy*** of ***receiving*** him again, on Easter! — a ***blessed resurrection*** that surely eased their grief and assured them that this Jesus was truly Messiah and Lord. Forty days he spent with them, but now how difficult to have to let him go ***again!*** How difficult, to have to watch their loved one slip away into heaven.

And yet, St. Luke ***doesn't*** say that it was difficult. Luke gives no indication of any sorrow or sadness for the disciples. He says nothing about them collapsing in tears or grief. Rather, he tells us that after Jesus withdrew from them, and was carried up into heaven, they ***worshiped*** him, and returned to Jerusalem with ***great joy!***

And that's a little hard to understand, given our own experience of loss and grief, and how we respond when a loved one leaves us. But the point is clear: ***this*** was ***not*** a time for sorrow and mourning. Instead, this was a time, first of all, for ***worship!***

St. Luke writes, "*they worshiped him.*" It is perhaps significant that in Luke's writing, this is the first and only time when the disciples, or anyone "*worshiped*" Jesus. Here, at the moment of his ascension, now the disciples ***worship*** him. As Christ ascends into heaven, ***now*** he is truly worthy of worship.

Now the disciples truly perceive Jesus as both man *and* God. He is no longer simply Jesus of Nazareth, but the Son of the Almighty, sitting in all his proper glory, at the right hand of the Father.

And so St. Luke invites us to see in these first disciples, the *model* for our own discipleship — that our *first task* in life, is to *worship* our Ascended Lord. We sometimes forget that we were created for no greater purpose, than to *worship* God, and *serve* only him. We often get so caught up with our daily occupations — with work and family, with our troubles and trials, that we may neglect to fall on our knees and worship him who has been raised to sit in the heavenly places, far above all rule, and authority, and power, and dominion.

Indeed brothers and sisters, we have *no other priority* in life, but to *worship* him who left his throne in heaven, to take on our lowly flesh, to be one of us. Through his incarnation, Christ shares in *our humanity*. And now through his ascension, we share in *his divinity*.

In the Ascension, we see not just Jesus being lifted up into heaven, but ourselves — our humanity — *being lifted up as well*. The Ascension is not just the crowning glory of Jesus' earthly life and ministry. This is also the crowning glory of *our lives*, as we see, and are promised, that we too, will be taken up into heaven with him.

Which is why, though we grieve and mourn the loss of loved ones here; though we shed tears when we lose someone close to us — ultimately, we see our faithful departed, *not* dead and buried in a grave, *not* mere dust and ashes — but we see them, *with eyes of faith*, resting in the arms of our good Lord Jesus in heaven.

The Ascension of our Lord gives us eyes to see that in the heavenly places with God, there is a place for our loved ones who have died in Christ, where we will be united with him, in his presence, in his care and keeping. The Gospel message is unmistakable: those who die in the Lord are in *his hands* — they are in *his care* and *keeping*, forever. So that death and grief and loss and sorrow, can be taken up, lifted up, with our loved ones, into heavenly joy.

In one of his Ascension Day homilies, Pope Benedict XVI wrote that the Ascension of our Lord “*is a sursum corda — an invitation to lift up our hearts — a movement toward the above into which we are called.*” “*Sursum corda*” is Latin for “*Lift up your hearts.*” In our liturgy, the pastor speaks that very invitation, and the congregation responds, “*We lift them to the Lord.*” At that point, we are lifting our hearts, up to the Lord who has ascended and even now is seated at the Father's right hand. We are lifting up our hearts, to the Lord, who is our hope and our salvation, and our life and our peace, and our joy — joy, in spite of loss, and loneliness — joy in spite of struggle and trial in life.

Which brings us to the second response St. Luke indicates for disciples — we are to return to Jerusalem with great joy, being continually in the temple blessing God. Like the apostles, we are to *return*.

Regularly I participate in one or two-day retreats with other pastors in the *Society of the Holy Trinity*, where we celebrate the Eucharist, and more or less pray through the day — following the monastic prayer offices. And sometimes, after such a retreat, it can be difficult to want to return to the day-to-day routine and stress of normal life and work.

In a similar way, Sunday worship is a welcome reprieve from the daily stress and grind. But of course, Sunday worship cannot continue indefinitely for us. We must leave the comfort and security of the church walls, and return again to the rest of life — to work, to family and friends, to co-workers, to neighbors, who may be difficult or unkind. We must return to those who need us — the lonely and the poor, those who are hurting.

We cannot only remain here — we must return to our daily life, because spreading the Gospel, proclaiming repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' name, sharing God's love, is to begin *there*. That's why Jesus commissioned the disciples, and *sent them out* — telling them to begin from Jerusalem. We too, are to be witnesses, and the Holy Spirit is given to empower us for this task and this ministry.

And lest we forget, Jesus Christ, ascended and glorified, does *not* mean he has departed, and we are left alone. Martin Luther knew how difficult this can be for us to remember, and so he wrote,

*We must therefore conceive of Jesus' ascension and Lordship
as something **active, energetic, and continuous**,
and must not imagine that He sits above,
while **we** hold the reins down here.*

***No**, Jesus ascended...for the reason
that there He can do His best work
and exercise dominion.*

*Had he remained on earth in visible form,
before a **few** people,*

*He could not have been there for **all** the people...*

*Therefore, He...made it possible for Him
to be in touch with all,*

*and to reign in all, to preach to all and to be heard by all,
and to be with all...*

*[B]eware, lest you imagine...that Jesus has gone,
and now is far away from us...*

[T]he very opposite is true:

*while He was on earth, Jesus was far away from us;
now, ascended, **He is very near.***

What a miracle, and a mystery, that though Christ has departed, when we lift up our hearts to him in worship, we are lifting them up, not so much to heaven, but to our Lord, **present now among us** in Word and Sacrament — our Lord who is with us **always**, even to the close of the age.

So let us exult with worthy joy, and be glad with a holy thanksgiving. Lift up your hearts to the Lord, and let your lives be lifted up — as we worship and praise our ascended Lord Jesus Christ!

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

In the name of the Father, and of the ✝ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.