

Festival of Our Lord's Ascension | St. Mark 16:14-20
May 28, 2017 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O Jesus Christ, almighty Son of God, You are no longer in humiliation here on earth, but are seated at the right hand of Your Father, Lord over all things: We beseech You, send us Your Holy Spirit; give Your Church pious pastors, preserve Your Word, control and restrain the devil and all who would oppress us; mightily uphold Your kingdom, until all Your enemies have been put under Your feet, that we may hold the victory over sin, death, and the devil; through You, who live and reign with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 157)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Afterward [Jesus] appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and He rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw Him after He had risen. / And He said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in My name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." / So then the Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs. (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who rules over His kingdom of power on earth, His kingdom of grace in the Church, and His kingdom of glory in heaven, dear fellow redeemed:

When Pharaoh realized his slave labor was gone after the Israelites marched out of Egypt, he pursued them with his army. The Israelites were camped by the Red Sea with no way to escape. It would be an easy victory for Pharaoh! But then the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground, and Pharaoh's army was totally destroyed.

When Goliath looked down on his challenger, the young David, he mocked and cursed him. "I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the field," he said (1Sam. 17:44). But Goliath soon fell to the ground with a stone embedded in his forehead, and the Philistine army was routed.

When Sennacherib king of Assyria brought his soldiers to the walls of Jerusalem, he planned to destroy the city and unseat King Hezekiah. But Hezekiah prayed to the LORD, and the LORD sent His angel to destroy the Assyrian army – 185,000 struck down in one night.

When Jesus was nailed to the cross, His enemies cried out, *“You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross”* (Mt. 27:39-40). They thought they would finally be rid of this Man they hated. They thought they could make the people forget Him. But then Jesus rose again from the dead.

As we can see, the power of the LORD God is often underestimated. He is regarded as no more real than a fairy tale character. His people are despised also as those who are weak-minded and delusional. God’s enemies are certain of victory. But the psalmist writes, *“He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, ‘As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill’”* (Ps. 2:4-6). The King of heaven reigns over all things. He cannot be overcome. So we ask: **With Jesus Enthroned, How Can We Fail?**

I

When Jesus ascended into heaven, the scene on the other side of the clouds was much different than the scene below. St. John in his Revelation describes the appearing of a Lamb in heaven who was worshiped by all the heavenly hosts. He writes, *“Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’”* (5:11-12). While heaven was erupting in a chorus of praise, this was the scene on the earth: a small group of men stood squinting up at the sky trying to figure out where Jesus went.

This shows well a reality and a perception. The reality is that *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to [Jesus],”* just as He said (Mt. 28:18). He paid for sin, conquered death, and now sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. His most powerful enemies took their best shot at Him, and they lost. He reigns supreme over all and uses His enemies as His footstool (Ps. 110:1). That’s the reality. But the perception from our perspective here on earth is that Jesus is very far away, hidden from us. We feel like we lose more ground than we gain against the devil and his workers. We are often afraid of what the world may do to us because of our belief. This is how we can fail even though Jesus is enthroned.

If Jesus had not sent the Holy Spirit to the disciples, they would have failed too. He appeared to them after His resurrection and rebuked them, because they did not believe the reports of those who had seen Him alive. But when the Holy Spirit came to them at Pentecost, He taught them all things and brought to their remembrance everything Jesus said to them (Jn. 14:26). The Holy Spirit gave them courage, so that they did *“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation”* (v. 15).

As they went, they were accompanied by the signs Jesus foretold. In His name they cast out demons, like when the Apostle Paul commanded a demon to come out of a young girl (Ac. 16:18). They spoke in new tongues, like the Gentiles who were converted when the Apostle Peter preached in the household of Cornelius (Ac. 10:44-46). They were spared from the deadly

poison of serpents, like when Paul was bitten by a viper on the island of Malta and suffered no harm (Ac. 28:3-6). But the power to do these signs was not their power, and the work was not really their work. The last part of today's text tells us that "*they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs*" (v. 20). This says that the Lord was with them! He did the signs!

But didn't He ascend into heaven? How could He be with His disciples on earth if He was up there? This is a mystery to our reason. Yet these two things are true: The Son of God sits at the right hand of His Father in the flesh. He is also with us in this fallen world in the flesh. This is possible because Jesus is not just a Man. He is not bound by the laws of nature that bind us. He is the God-Man. That means wherever Jesus is as God, He is there as Man. His person cannot be divided. And He is not simply in two places; He is in all places. God the Father's right hand is the position of all power and authority. It is not a location or a specific place. Since God is omnipresent, His "right hand" is too. Jesus now reigns over all things in all places as God and Man.

And we would agree that something can be present even though it is not seen. Is there oxygen in the air? Is there wind outside? We know there is oxygen because we are alive. We know there is wind because we can feel the breeze and see the swaying of trees. But what is the evidence of Jesus' presence? How can we know He is here? Because the signs that accompanied the apostles are not so prominent today. The Church appears to be diminishing and not growing.

II

The evidence of Jesus' presence is in His disciples. If Jesus were not active among us today, there would be not even one believer. No person comes to Jesus by his own power. No sinner dead in his sin can choose the life that Jesus won. The message of the Gospel is what breaks through hardened hearts of sin. Wherever the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered, Jesus is at work. Today's text says that the apostles "*preached everywhere,*" and the Lord "*confirmed the message by accompanying signs.*" It was all about the message. The Word of God's grace brings Jesus to sinners and sinners to Jesus.

What more could we need than we have in Jesus? Nothing. But what more do we want? Plenty. This is because we are discontent with the way the Lord does things. He exercises His power and authority and extends His kingdom through words, water, bread and wine. But this seems all too simple for a world that looks for spectacular. Why doesn't Jesus show the world what we know Him to be? Why doesn't He make every sinner fall to His knees before Him? Why doesn't He destroy the ones who hate Him? The time will come for the visible manifestation of His glory and power, but that time is not yet.

Now is the time for God's power to be hidden in Word and Sacraments. Now is the era of the Church militant, the Church in struggle, the Church in weakness. But not a Church without hope. Jesus is still enthroned, and Jesus is still present. He is still at work in His Church and in the world. You are still on the side of strength. You are still protected and led by the Good Shepherd. You are still loved with a perfect love, and your place is still reserved in heaven.

This is all true even though you have not always trusted in Him who reigns in glory. You let the threats of the world shake your confidence in Him. You often follow your stubborn, sinful heart

and do not listen to His Word. But Jesus still wants to be your King and give you the treasures of His grace. He forgives your feeble allegiance. He again repeats His promise which does not change, *"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved"* (v. 16). He does not give you a list of demands for you to prove yourself to Him. He says that if you have been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and if you believe in Him as your one and only Savior from devil, sin, and death, you will be saved. That's it.

What a comfort that is! Even though you have failed Jesus, He does not fail you. His Word stands. It cannot be overcome, because He cannot be overcome. The work to save you is complete. Through baptism, your sin was nailed to Jesus' cross and buried in His grave. Through baptism, you rose again to new life with Jesus, never to die again. Through a regular use of the means of grace, you stay connected to this life, because you stay connected to Him. Jesus is enthroned in heaven, and you will soon see Him in His glory as the saints and angels in heaven see Him. And then you will praise Him without any doubt or fear just as they do.

The hymnwriter said it well:

As true as God's own Word is true,
Not earth nor hell with all their crew
Against us shall prevail.
A jest and byword are they grown;
God is with us, we are His own;
Our vict'ry cannot fail. (ELH #375, v. 3)

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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