

Festival of the Ascension of Our Lord
Acts 1:1-11: "Where Is Jesus When You Need Him?"
May 21, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

+ + +

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. (*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, 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 today is taken from the first chapter of the Book of Acts. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen. He presented Himself alive to them after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. And while staying with them He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, He said, "you heard from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." / So when they had come together, they asked Him, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" / He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." / And when He had said these things, as they were looking on, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. / And while they were gazing into heaven as He went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven." (ESV)

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

In Christ Jesus, who is present with us and all His disciples just as He promised He would be, dear fellow redeemed:

The chief priests and the Pharisees had heard Jesus loud and clear. He said He would rise again on the third day after His death. Once they succeeded in having Him crucified, they remembered His words. They thought His disciples might now try to steal away His body and declare that He had risen. So they had a guard positioned at the tomb. They did not know that these soldiers would become the first witnesses of the empty tomb when an angel came down from heaven and rolled away the stone.

Some of the soldiers went trembling to the religious leaders and reported what they had seen. The leaders gave them hush money and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep’” (Mat. 28:13). So the religious leaders heard Jesus’ prediction, they heard the eyewitness account of these men that the tomb was empty, and they still denied that Jesus is who He said!

They may have silenced the guard, but I can’t imagine they were able to silence the thoughts and imaginations of their hearts. They must have dreaded the very real possibility that Jesus would turn up alive and show Himself to everyone. Then what could they say? Who would listen to them then?

It’s kind of surprising that Jesus did not do this. What better proof of His Word could there be than to take a victory lap all around Jerusalem? Or better still, why didn’t Jesus take His message on the road? “Look, they crucified Me—you can see the marks in My hands and feet. I died and was closed up in a tomb. But here I am alive again! That’s because I am the holy Son of God, the Savior of the world. Nothing—not even death—can overcome Me!”

Instead, the forty days between His resurrection and ascension were relatively low-key. He appeared to His disciples at different times, but He seems to have hidden Himself for the better part of those days. When He did appear to them, He spoke to them “*about the kingdom of God,*” and He told them to expect the outpouring of the Holy Spirit “*not many days from now.*” Then He said, “*you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*”

Jesus made it clear that He was giving the work of spreading the Gospel of salvation to the disciples. But why was Jesus so eager to leave them? Why not proclaim the message Himself until the Christian Church was well-established? The disciples did not feel ready to have the Lord leave. We can see this in the way they intently gazed into heaven when Jesus ascended. How could He depart from them and keep His promise to be with them always?

Jesus’ ascension marks the transition point between the winning of salvation and the distributing of it. His ascension to His Father’s right hand is the crowning moment of His saving work. He had descended (or come down) from heaven to take on our flesh and save us, and now He was ascending (or going up) to heaven having won the victory over sin, death, and hell. Just ten days after this, the Holy Spirit would come upon the disciples and propel the Gospel throughout the known world.

So was that it for Jesus? Did He return to heaven to enjoy a well-deserved rest of a few thousand years after suffering the eternal punishment for sin? Is He just biding His time until the day comes for His triumphant return to earth? It sure would be nice to have Him here again like He was 2,000 years ago. The church on earth—broken in so many pieces—needs Him to come and set everything right. We need Him to bring healing to the sick—especially now when many are contracting a virus and some are dying. We need Him to calm our troubled hearts and encourage us on our way like He did His disciples.

All these things we need Him to do, He still does—just not in the way we want Him to. He is at work in the church by the power of His Word mending divisions and strengthening the

fellowship of believers. He is bringing healing to the sick through the care of medical personnel and compassionate family and friends. And He does comfort and encourage us as He visits us through the means of grace.

But we want more. We want Him to be present with us visibly, to show His love for us by performing miracles and taking away our hurt and pain. It is frustrating to be told again and again of His great love for us while everything in our life is falling apart. How is His love helping me recover my health? How is it helping me pay my bills? How will it fix the breakdown in my relationship? How will it make my boss treat me more fairly? How will it remove my loneliness, depression, and anguish?

This is where we go wrong: we assume that Jesus is not active because things are not turning out the way we want. Or we assume that He does not love us as much as the Bible says He does. The second error is put to rest by the fact of His sacrificial death. He didn't go to the cross for any wrong He had done. He went there to pay for all our sins – our sins against Him! That's a love we can't even come close to matching.

It is also wrong to think that Jesus is not active anymore on earth. The Bible outlines three main areas of activity – His three-fold office as our Savior. Jesus continues to work on our behalf as a Prophet, a Priest, and a King. As Prophet, He speaks to us through His powerful Word and sends men to declare His forgiveness to His people. As Priest, He intercedes for us at the Father's right hand and brings our needs before the throne of grace. As King, He rules over all things especially for the benefit of His Church and brings all the departed saints to His kingdom of glory. That's a lot of activity!

So He is very aware of what is going on in your life. But how can you be assured of His presence? How can you be certain He is here with you no matter what you are going through? He may not show Himself to you like you would want. But He does promise to be with you, and He does not promise anything lightly. The apostle Paul writes that when Jesus ascended into heaven, His Father *"put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all"* (Eph. 1:22-23).

You are part of Christ's body. You are a member of His holy Church by faith in Him. He could no easier forget you or cast you aside than you could forget or cast aside your own arm or foot. He loves you. He wants you to remain with Him and so inherit eternal life and never-ending joy. That's why He specially visits you through the preaching of His Word and through His Sacraments.

You do not see Him come visibly. But He is right here with you, even in the flesh that was nailed to the cross and came alive again in the tomb. Jesus did not lie to His disciples; He was with them always. He is with you too, to the end of each day, to the end of your life, and to the end of the world (ELH Evening Collect, p. 126).

Where Is Jesus When You Need Him? He is still here, wielding *"all authority in heaven and on earth"* (Mat. 28:18). He is here to bring His forgiveness and grace to your heart when you hear His Word. He is here to apply His saving gifts in Holy Baptism. He is here to give His own

body and blood for you to eat and to drink for the remission of your sins. His Word and Sacraments are where Jesus promises to be found *“always, to the end of the age”* (v. 20).

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.

+ + +