

The Festival of Our Lord's Ascension – Pr. Faugstad exordium & sermon
St. Mark 16:14-20: "The King's Messengers Speak with His Authority."
May 16/17, 2026 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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When I was younger, it was common for athletes who had just won a championship to be asked what they were going to do next. And the answer they gave was almost always the same: "I'm going to Disneyland!"

What about Jesus when He won the victory over sin, death, and the devil? Where would He go? His disciples might have wished He would say, "I am going to go appear to the Jewish Council that condemned Me," or "visit Pontius Pilate's headquarters," or even "march to the palace of the Roman Emperor." Who could stand against Jesus or deny His power now that He had conquered death itself?

But Jesus had already told them where He was going. Just before His crucifixion, He said multiple times, "I am going to the Father" (Joh. 14:28, 16:5). On the day of His resurrection, He told Mary Magdalene to tell the disciples, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (Joh. 20:17).

But what good would going to the Father do? Why leave the earth at His hour of victory? Jesus ascended to the right hand of His Father because the work the Father had sent Him to do was complete.

God the Father sent His Son to fulfill the law for us sinners – check!

He sent His Son to make atonement for all sin by offering His perfect life on the cross – finished!

He sent His Son to defeat death by rising in victory over death and the grave – done!

Everything necessary to win our salvation was accomplished by Jesus. So now He ascended to His Father.

He ascended to prepare a place for us in His Father's house (Joh. 14:2).

He ascended so that His enemies would become His footstool (Psa. 110:1, Heb. 10:13), and He would become Head over all things to His body the Church (Eph. 1:22-23).

He ascended so that the Holy Spirit would be sent out to convert hearts and strengthen faith through the Gospel until the end of time (Joh. 16:7).

Jesus had many good reasons for returning to His Father. This was all part of the plan. Jesus' ascension, His removal of His visible presence, was not a sad day. It was not a day of loss. The disciples "returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (Luk. 24:52), and we join them in rejoicing.

Let us rise to sing the hymn printed in the service folder, "O Wondrous Conqueror and Great":

O wondrous Conqueror and great,
Scorned by the world You did create,
Your work is all completed!
Your toilsome course is at an end;

You to the Father do ascend,
In royal glory seated.
Lowly,
Holy,
Now victorious,
High and glorious:
Earth and heaven
To Your rule, O Christ, are given.

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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 written in 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. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, the King who reigns over all things and gives us the gifts of His grace, dear fellow redeemed:

The beginning and the end of today's Gospel reading portrays the disciples in very different ways. Jesus first appeared to His disciples on Easter evening when they were huddled together in a tightly secured room. They were afraid of both the Jewish and the Roman authorities. If the authorities could do what they did to Jesus, wouldn't Jesus' followers be next?

Had they taken seriously Jesus' words leading up to His crucifixion, they should have been excited about that Sunday. He told them multiple times that He would suffer many things in Jerusalem and would be killed, but on the third day He would rise. Sunday was the third day. Everything else Jesus said had happened. But in the disciples' estimation, the thought of Jesus rising from the dead was a bridge too far. They might have thought to themselves: if He had the power to rise from the dead, why would He let Himself be arrested and killed in the first place?

The first message Jesus spoke to His disciples on that Sunday was, "Peace be with you" (Joh. 20:19). He wanted them to know they were still His disciples. He had not rejected them. But He did take

them to task for denying His resurrection. St. Mark writes that *“He rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw Him after He had risen.”*

Everything hinged on His resurrection. It verified that Jesus was who He said – the eternal Son of God. It gave meaning to His suffering and death – these were done to make atonement for sin. And it gave a clear message and direction for what the disciples of Jesus would do going forward. They would tell everyone about the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, that He died and rose to save the world of sinners.

This is still the mission and message of the church. Jesus said, *“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.”* He doesn’t restrict the proclamation of the Gospel to certain groups of people or certain places. He wants the message of salvation to be broadcast everywhere. He wants everyone to know that He *“was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification”* (Rom. 4:25).

People are converted and become members of His holy body by Baptism, and they remain in that baptismal grace by continuing to hear His Word (Mat. 28:19-20). Baptism alone does not guarantee that someone will go to heaven, because the faith worked through the water and Word of Baptism can be lost. Jesus says, *“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe – whether or not they have been baptized – will be condemned.”*

The key is to cling to Jesus’ saving Word. That is why Jesus had to rebuke His disciples. They weren’t listening to and trusting His Word. They were going by what seemed right to them. They were following their own reason. We are tempted to do the same today. We are tempted to go along with what the culture around us promotes, even when it is contrary to the Word of God. We do this because we don’t want to be singled out and targeted. We don’t want to be rejected by others when our beliefs don’t match up with the prevailing opinions around us.

But Jesus does not call us to fit in with the world. He calls us to be set apart. He says, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.... For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?”* (Mat. 16:24,26). Jesus gives us more than the world. The world is small and insignificant compared with what He has won for us.

If you sold your soul for everything desirable in the world, you would only have it for a short time, and whatever you had would be lost. Jesus gives you eternal treasures that will never be taken from you. Through His death to pay for your sins and His resurrection to overcome your death, He has restored the image of God to you that Adam and Eve lost in the fall. You are covered in His righteousness and credited with His perfection. You have the victory over sin, death, and devil. You have eternal life.

These are the gifts of the King. He has the authority to give them to whomever He wants. He chooses to give them to you, and He wants to give them to many others besides. After Jesus’ ascension, this became clear to His disciples. They understood that they would not be with Jesus like they were before, speaking with Him face to face and physically going wherever He went. But He promised that He would be with them *“always, to the end of the age”* (Mat. 28:20).

Jesus' ascension did not mean He had deserted His chosen disciples or any who would come after them. It meant that His work that the Father sent Him to do was complete. His ascension also did not mean that He was going into retirement. Today's reading makes that clear. He promised to work signs through those who spread the message of salvation, such as casting out demons, making them immune to deadly poison, and giving them the ability to heal. When His disciples went out preaching the message of salvation, we are told that *"the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs."*

Those signs were given for the initial spread of the Gospel. You can read in the Book of Acts about the miraculous abilities He gave the apostles. But once the early churches were established, those special gifts of the Spirit diminished. Jesus does not teach us to focus on having unique spiritual gifts, which is all that some modern Christian churches want to talk about. Jesus instead teaches us to hold fast to the Gospel.

The mission of His Church is to speak His Word. We are simply messengers of the King. We don't come up with our own message, something new to excite the people in our community. We faithfully speak what we have been taught. We give what we have been given. We comfort as we have been comforted.

It may seem to us at times that we need something more. We hear the message of Jesus' death and resurrection so often that it might seem to lose its power. If it is powerful, why don't we see more growth in our churches? But what the King does with His Word is not the business of His subjects. The authority behind the Word is not ours; it is His. By the same token, the pressure to get results is not on us. When the King sends out His messengers, when Jesus sends out believers, our duty is to proclaim what He has done, and He will see to it that the Gospel message accomplishes what He pleases (Isa. 55:11)

Just as the Lord was still at work with His disciples after His ascension, so He is still working among us. From His position at the right hand of His Father, He fills all things, particularly working for the good of His Church (Eph. 1:22-23). It is His absolution that you hear from my mouth. It is His Word that sounds forth from the pulpit. It is His holy body and blood you receive in the Sacrament of the Altar.

His grace given to you and the Holy Spirit working in you is what gives you the motivation and the strength to take part in *"proclaim[ing] the gospel to the whole creation."* Just as Jesus' resurrection turned His disciples from fear to faith and cowardice to courage, so it does the same for you. You are a messenger of the crucified and risen King, Jesus Christ, at whose name *"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"* (Phi. 2:10-11).

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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