

Ascended, but Not Gone
Sunday, Easter 7, Year B
Acts 1:12-26; 1 John 5:9-15; John 17:12-26
May 9, 2021

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This last Thursday we must something very important. No, it wasn't in the news. But, it was forty days after Easter, which means, it was the day of Jesus' ascension into heaven. In other words, Jesus went home. After accomplishing His work here among us, He went back to His Father and took His rightful place, seated at the right hand of God the Father.

From there He is reigning. That's right, the reign of Christ is now. We are in what Revelation calls the 1,000-year reign of Christ. It isn't, as some would say, a future event. It is happening right now.

And from His throne in heaven, Jesus, and God the Father, sent the messenger, the counselor, the helper, the Paraclete; the blessed and Holy Spirit. This event we will celebrate next Sunday; Pentecost Sunday.

These two days are intricately connected. If Jesus hadn't ascended, the Holy Spirit wouldn't have come. Jesus has told us, *"...it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you"* (John 16:7).

And, then He says, *"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come"* (John 16:12-13).

Jesus warned His disciples that He would be leaving.

And, today, in our Gospel reading, Jesus is praying for them; Those men who remained faithful. Obviously, He loves them, cares for them, and knows they will struggle once He is gone. Why else would He pray for them?

So, He does what all of us should do when we have concerns and laments, He speaks to our Heavenly Father. It is good for us to remember that Jesus prayed on behalf of His disciples, and in the verses directly following today's reading, He includes you and me in that prayer.

What is also very good for us to remember, is that the One who spoke to God on our behalf, the very Son of God, who was right here with us on earth, is, right now, at this very moment, sitting at the right hand of that same God, and doing the exact same thing for you and me. He is interceding on your behalf.

St. Paul wrote to the Romans, "*Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us*" (Romans 8:34).

That should bring you comfort. He is the very One who humiliated Himself, leaving the glory of heaven and His Father's presence, to be born in the image of those who had betrayed God, and then, to even further humiliate Himself, by dying for them. It is He, who loved you that much, who is now speaking to God on your behalf.

Unfortunately, the Ascension is an all but forgotten holy day. Not many churches have special services to commemorate and celebrate that day. I mean, who wants to come to church on a Thursday? But, I hope you see that there is so much in it that we should ponder.

I mean, consider this: While He left us, He didn't leave us. He went to prepare a place for you. He went so that He can come back at the conclusion of all things. He ascended, so that, one

day, we, too will ascend. Where He leads, we follow. From death to resurrection. From humiliation to glorification.

St. Paul told the church in Colossae that *"[Jesus] is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross"* (Colossians 1:18-20).

And, we, take up our cross and follow Him. Where He leads, we follow. What He did, we do. //In fact, we even do it greater than He did.//

That got your attention, didn't it? If you missed it, I'll say it again. What He did, we do. In fact, we do it greater than He did.

I understand that to our ears this could borderline on blasphemy. Possibly, even heresy. But, it is true. How do I know it is true? Because, Jesus said so, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father"* (John 14:12).

See. Jesus said it. But, what does this mean?

Think of the works that Jesus had done. And, look at the works that His followers, His disciples for the past two millennia, have done.

Jesus fed more than 5,000 people at one meal. More than 4,000 at another. Yet, how many people are fed by Christians throughout the world in a given day? Millions?

Look at the people that Jesus healed; lepers, mutes, lame, deaf, paralyzed... How many hospitals have been established in His name to do the same?

He encouraged us to take care of the orphans. Christians are the largest creators and operators of orphanages throughout the world. And, many children are housed, fed and cared for who otherwise may have perished.

If Jesus had stayed here, no one would look to the church. They would be looking halfway around the world to the miracle worker. You and I would have little to do. You and I would have little to proclaim. You and I, if we truly believed, would be where ever He would be. Jerusalem? Galilee?

But, because He ascended. God's people are a people of mercy, love, care and compassion. We carry on His good work and mission.

Yes, the world only points at us when we call out their sin and bad deeds or when a prominent pastor falls. But, they fail to acknowledge that Christianity is the root and cause of much good in the world.

God's people, mobilized on a daily basis, are ambassadors of God's love, forgiveness, and peace to a hurt, and hurtful, world, right here in this town.

And, why do we do these things? Certainly, by the command of Jesus and His Father in heaven. But, we are empowered by faith. And by His overflowing love. Both of which dwells in us by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus ascended, so that we would pick up where He left off. He ascended, so that the Holy Spirit would come and draw people to Himself. He ascended, so that He could intercede for us. He ascended, so that we would one day be called home to Him. He ascended, so that He could come back and reset all things for those who trust in Him.

So, why hasn't He come back yet? According to some sources, there are anywhere between 50,000-80,000 new Christians every day!! A large discrepancy, I know, but it can't be easy to track. That's, at least, 350,000 new Christians this week!

Imagine, then, if Jesus had come back last week, and those 350,000 people, who had not yet become Christians, were left out of heaven? What about the 350,000 that will convert this week? Next week?

Our God wants all people to be saved. He is waiting, because of His mercy for those who are like the prodigal son, the woman at the well, the 3,000 who will be converted after Pentecost.

My friends, we have much work to do. If we truly believe what God tells us in the Scripture, then we have a lot of work to do.

Jesus was praying for disciples and preparing them for this work. A work that we now share in and are a part of.

He equipped them on Pentecost for that work. And He does so each Sunday for you and me. He sends His Holy Spirit to come to us. And, He descends on us in Word and Sacrament. Correcting us, hearing us, encouraging us, answering us, forgiving us, empowering us...

Yes, Jesus ascended, but He didn't leave us. He is right here with us, right now giving His gifts of love, mercy, grace, forgiveness, daily bread... He does that through Word and Sacrament and through His bountiful goodness.

Think on this. Jesus' final words in the book of Matthew, right before He ascended into heaven, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age"* (Matthew 28:19-20).

Now may the peace that passes all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.



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