

ASCENSION OF OUR LORD

Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church

Days of Great Joy

Luke 24:44-53

⁴⁴ He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Forty days. That's how long Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection. And it seems they needed everyone of them. The horror and grief of the three days when Jesus was crucified and sealed in the tomb left a mark on them. And then to see him resurrected! It was not so easy for them to believe. Things like fear and doubt and guilt, don't just go away on their own. It took time. It took Jesus. Forty days of being with him. Sharing meals. Listening to him. Looking at him.

But now the forty days are up, and it's time for Jesus to ascend to the right hand of his Father. Forty days: the same number of days it rained on Noah's ark. The same number of days Moses was with God on Mt Sinai, the Israelite spies explored the land of Canaan, and Goliath taunted the army of Israel before the shepherd boy David did him in. It took Elijah forty days to journey to Mt Horeb and hear the still small voice of God. It was how long God commanded Jonah to tell the Ninevites they had left to repent. Forty days: the same number of days Jesus fasted in the wilderness while being tempted by Satan. Forty days: for some reason God's number of days. So, when they're up, Jesus is taken up from his disciples and a cloud hides him from their sight. And they know they will not see him again until in glory.

"Suddenly two men dressed in white" – angels – stand next to them and ask why they are staring into the sky. We're not told exactly how the disciples answered them, other than this curious passage toward the end of today's Holy Gospel: "Then [the disciples] worshiped [Jesus] and returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (Luke 24:52).

Doesn't that strike you as a bit odd? The previously doubting, fearful and guilt-ridden disciples weren't sad when Jesus had left. Just the opposite! They're filled with "great joy." Why that is and what it means for us is what we're going to talk about this evening/morning.

Luke, who is responsible for both accounts of the Ascension we heard today, speaks of joy often in his writings. But of "great joy" only one other time – when the angel told the shepherds that Jesus was born. In other words, when Jesus came down from heaven in his incarnation. "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10). Luke uses it again at the Ascension, for now those words have been fulfilled. Now there *is* great joy for all people. For Jesus' victory *is* for all people. He defeated sin, death and hell for everyone. The doors to heaven *are* open to all who'd believe in him. To you and me. To Peter, James, and John and the rest. For that reason alone, the disciples are filled with great joy when Jesus ascends!

But there are more reasons. A moment ago, I tossed out the term "incarnation." That's what we call the miracle of Christmas, when the Son of God came down from heaven and became fully human. "Born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law" (Galatians 4:4), as St Paul would explain it to the Galatian Christians. But now that his redeeming work was done, what does Jesus do with his humanity? Does he leave it behind, like some dirty work clothes? Not at all! He takes it back to heaven with him! This means that the original honor of mankind, forfeited by Adam and Eve, has been restored by Jesus. Humanity no longer has to hide in the bushes covered in the guilt and shame. It's back where it belongs: with God in glory. For in God's Son and Mary's Son sin is forgiven and death is defeated! We will rise, as Jesus has risen from the dead. And we will ascend as Jesus has ascended into heaven!

So, “[the disciples] returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God” (Luke 24:53). Not with personal prayers, mumbled to themselves in private. They were in public, proclaiming the Christmas angel’s “good news of great joy” that there is forgiveness for all people in Jesus ... that there is the hope of eternal life for all people in Jesus ... that there is a Savior for all people in Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. Ten days later, when the Holy Spirit came upon them on that first New Testament Pentecost, this was the message they carried to all the world. The message that has now come to us and gives us great joy.

Which, of course, we need. Every one of us. For how often does trouble, tribulation and tumult rain down on us in this world and rob us of our joy? Some days the arrogant taunts of God’s enemies take it away. Other days, like Elijah, we feel like we’re the only one left who believes. When the world is coming apart at the seams and no one seems to care, it’s hard to have much joy. When we’re alone in our own wilderness, failing again and again to resist temptation, and falling – like seemingly everyone else - ever further into sin, there’s not a lot to be happy about. Where is the good news of great joy for us then?

It’s not just found on Christmas, but also and especially on this/that fortieth day when our Lord ascended. That’s what the Apostle Paul was explaining in today’s Second Lesson, when he reminded us that Christ is “seated ... at [God’s] right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in this present age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:20, 21). The divine and human Jesus is in control, not the sinister and Satanic, not the wicked and worldly, not the fears and doubts of the heart or the burden of one’s conscience. For “God [has] placed all things under his feet” – including those things - “and appointed him to be head over everything for the church” (Ep 1:22) ... that would be for us ... for you, so that his Gospel may be proclaimed to the ends of the earth and to the end of the earth and to you ... and so that you and all people might have great joy. When Jesus ascended a cloud did hide him from the disciples’ sight. But it has never hidden us from his sight – not even now.

In fact, Jesus’ Ascension means he is more present with us now than he was before. He is not ruling from some far away and unknown place named heaven, but the Second Lesson said, he’s present with us in “the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Ep 1:23). That means Jesus is no longer found just in Zacchaeus house or at the table of Simon or in the home of Mary and Martha. He’s no longer here but not there. He’s not just present with you in your hour of need, and therefore can’t be present in mine, as if we have to take turns or compete for his attention. The Lord Jesus Christ ascended to resume being everywhere at the same time, but especially wherever his Word is. That means he’s present in every font and pulpit and altar of this world. Speaking to his disciples, washing us, feeding us, forgiving us, strengthening us, and sending us out with his message of great joy that is for all people.

So, the fortieth day after Easter the disciples were right to feel great joy. Now that we know why ... that Jesus’ Ascension means that 1.) his victory is for all people, that 2.) humanity is no longer separated from God, that 3.) Jesus is in control of what’s happening in the here and now, and that 4.) he’s present with us in his Word ... in light of all that, we have good reason to feel the same way every day, as we worship him and take his good news of great joy to the world.

Amen.

Prayer of the Day

M: Lord Jesus, King of glory [on this day] you ascended far above the heavens and at God's right hand you rule the nations. Leave us not alone, we pray, but grant us the Spirit of truth that at your command and by your power we may be your witnesses in all the world; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C: **Amen.**

Prayers of the Church

M: p. 32

Special requests

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Mother's Day Post-Carnation Prayer

M: Lord God, heavenly Father, your gift of mothers comes in many different forms, and today we celebrate them all.

Everyone here is either a son or a daughter. So, we thank you for our own mothers.

For those women who have joined you in heaven and whom we miss dearly here on earth; we thank you for the mothers of the past.

For every woman who is working day and night to raise her children right now; we thank you for the mothers of today.

For all the women who are expecting but aren't quite mothers yet; we thank you for the soon-to-be mothers. Be with them and their babies.

For the women who took in others' children through adoption and foster care, we thank you for the mothers with hearts so big.

For the women who have lost a child to death and must carry on, we thank you God for the mothers who are so strong.

For all women who desperately wanted to have children of their own, but instead mother everyone else; we thank you for the mothers in spirit.

We thank you, Lord, for the women who have influenced our lives in so many ways. We pray that we will honor you in our love and regard of them. Amen.

Benediction