



Jesus Everywhere + May 12, 2024

The Ascension of Our Lord

Luke 24:44-53

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One of my favorite professors at Trinity Lutheran Seminary was Mark Allan Powell, who has written very readable books on loving Jesus and what that means. In fact, his books are so readable that one of his publishers is HarperCollins, which means that he made into the mainstream – which almost never happens with seminary professors!

Like his books, Mark Powell is very relatable and also a little wacky. He once mesmerized our class by telling us a story of how he was working late one night in his second-floor office, glanced out the window and saw angels dancing in the courtyard. We absolutely believed him. Another thing he told us was that you should always be looking up at the clouds, because you never know when Jesus might return -- and when that happens, you really do not want to miss it. I think about this a lot, as it gives me a reason to scan the heavens at every opportunity, day or night.

Today is technically the Seventh Sunday of Easter, but we are celebrating Jesus' Ascension, which the church recognizes on the 40th day after Easter – which is why it always falls on a Thursday. This year it was May 9. In our Acts reading for this day, we find the group of Jesus' disciples looking up into the clouds – not because they are expecting Jesus, but because he has just left them. They too are mesmerized even though they knew this would be coming; remember in John's Gospel how Jesus told Mary in the garden on Easter morning, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Maybe, like so much else that Jesus told them, it went in one ear and out the other.

Ascension is a very important day in the life of the church for two reasons – it's about Jesus and it's about us.

First of course, It's about Jesus: The Ascension marks the end of Jesus' redemptive work on earth. It completes the arc of the Messiah's career – a career that we must remember included suffering. The risen Jesus appears to his disciples with his wounds on display, and he ascends as the wounded and risen one, as this little graphic illustrates. In other words, the suffering is not forgotten. It's not in over and done with. Instead, it becomes part of who he is as he ascends to be with his father, just as with our own suffering. The losses we grieve, the trials we endure, become part of us for the blessing of the world.

And Jesus' own suffering, all for us, becomes yet another way that he is always with us. In ascending to be with his Father, Jesus has broken through the boundaries of space and time. Because he is free of their physical limitations, Jesus is now able to be everywhere at once – especially in the challenges of our own lives, the trials during which we need him the most. When you say "I feel Jesus is with me," it's not just a feeling – he really is right there. Mystics and visionaries have seen Jesus standing in front of them. We don't necessarily need the affirmation of a vision. We already know he is actually with us.

Augustine saw this from the opposite perspective when he wrote that, because of the Ascension, “We are already in heaven with him, even though what is promised us has not been fulfilled in our bodies.” This same realization is expressed in a beautiful collect from earlier Lutheran and Anglican traditions: “Grant, we pray, almighty God, that as we believe your only-begotten Son to have ascended into heaven, so we may also in heart and mind there ascend, and with him continually dwell.”

So Ascension is of course about Jesus, but it is also about us. Jesus ascending to be with his Father is the action of God that then makes it possible for the Spirit to be poured out on all people on Pentecost. Today we are gearing up for that. We know it is coming.

Because a baseball game was on in the background as I was writing this, I am picturing it like being in the on-deck circle.

Imagine that the bases are loaded with two outs in a tie game in the bottom of the ninth inning, and you’re standing in the on-deck circle. Just kidding – that was a trick question. There is absolutely no purpose for you being in the on-deck circle in that situation, because you’ll never get up to bat. Instead, imagine there are runners at the corners with one out in a close game. We have been training and waiting and gearing up for our chance to step up to the plate. We are about to use the gifts God has given us to change the game, to change the world.

This is exactly where we find the disciples in today’s reading, at the end of Luke’s Gospel. Jesus gives them specific instructions before he ascends: “I am sending you what my Father promised. So stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

“Stay here.” Not “Go off on your own.” Not “Go home and wait.” Not “Hang out wherever.” “But stay here, in the city, in the midst of God’s people.

And when Jesus did then ascend, what did the disciples immediately do? “They worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” Continually blessing. An imperfect verb. Ongoing. Or as the 4th century Archbishop of Constantinople, Gregory of Nazianzus, put it, “With hymns unending may I celebrate thee in joy.” Isn’t it interesting how the ending of Luke’s gospel isn’t really an end? It keeps going. They are continually in worship.

Stay here. Worship. And oh yes, sing.

Grace members, friends, visitors, mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers and online viewers: I am very glad you are with us today. Your presence is a gift and a blessing. But we need more of us to be here with us. The wider community that is Grace Lutheran Church needs to be in the temple continually praising God, because this is the place, Luke and Acts tell us today, where we will be clothed with power from on high. It simply doesn’t happen unless we are together.

I know many of you lead busy lives. You have many other commitments. For some of you worship may be just one of those. Juggling everything can get tricky. But I am here to tell you that the Holy Spirit is about to be poured out onto Grace Lutheran Church, and you do not want to miss it. I am seeing the Spirit alive and active in our young people, who care deeply about worship and have lots of ideas. Just Did you know we know have two co-youth pastors?

I am seeing the Spirit alive and active among you in new visions being shared, new ideas that are taking root, new ministries which are already happening. New opportunities to experience healing of body and spirit. New opportunities for group conversation. We have new ideas about worship and about our entire Christian education program. New ideas about wine tastings -- meaning we want more of them.

So much is possible, if we gather as Jesus says and prepare for the Spirit to be poured down upon us. What today's texts are telling us is that worship is the center of our lives in Christ. Worship prepares us up to be fully responsive to the movements of the Holy Spirit. Because when the wind of the Spirit begins to blow, when the flames begin to alight on people's heads -- just as with the return of Jesus in the clouds, you won't want to miss it.