

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
The Ascension of Jesus Christ into Heaven, Thursday, May 29, 2014

✠ ✠ ✠

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 212:1-4, 218:6, 213, 216, 212:7.

Lessons: Psalm 47, Ephesians 1:16-23, Luke 24:44-53.

Sermon Text: Acts 1:1-11.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

For weeks now our sermons have been talking about what Jesus' disciples shall do when he is gone.

For weeks now – 40 days to be exact – Jesus himself has been talking about what his disciples shall do when he is gone.

Now he is gone. Today he ascends into heaven to be with my God and your God, for we confess in the Apostolic Creed, that he sits “on the right hand of God the father Almighty, and shall come again to judge the quick and the dead.”

JESUS ASCENDS BODILY INTO HEAVEN

- 1. His work in person is done on earth.**
- 2. Jesus really, truly ascended into heaven.**
- 3. We, too, have work to do before he will come again in the clouds.**

Jesus' resurrection had demonstrated beyond a doubt that he is the Lord's Anointed. Would he now do what many hoped the Lord's Anointed would do? A popular hope among the Jewish people was that the Messiah would bring back the days of David and Solomon, when the kingdom of Israel was at its greatest. They hoped that Israel would not only be free from Roman domination but would also be a world power.

The teaching of Jesus continued even after his resurrection, although Scripture does not tell us that he spoke before the general public, but does tell us that he spoke to believers. In the forty days up to the day of his ascension he commissioned his disciples and gave them certain tasks and obligations. On the very day he ascended into heaven he reminds them of their commission and their obligations, just as he does us today.

The commission by Jesus to preach the Gospel to the entire world is not something he did independently of the other two persons of the Triune God. When Jesus appeared to his disciples on the evening of the day he rose from the dead, we read *"Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'"* (John 20:21-23)

It was through that same divine Holy Spirit whom they also received in extraordinary measure 50 days after his ascension, on Pentecost, that all Scriptures have been recorded. All the communications of Jesus to his disciples are transmitted through the working of the Spirit, whom he breathed upon them on Easter evening,

John in his first epistle assures us this about the Father and how he is totally involved in all that Jesus Christ does. *"And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God."* (1 John 4:14-15)

On the day he ascended into heaven, our text tells us: *"So when they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'"* Even this select group of his disciples still needed instruction about Messiah's purpose and the nature of God's kingdom. He does not ridicule their ignorance or lack of understanding. *"He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be*

my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” It was not for them or us to know when God will bring his great plan to completion. It is enough to know that he has a plan for his kingdom and that his will is gracious and good. God has marked on his calendar the day of Judgment and the end of all things and made a note of the hour. We are not to try to determine the time of our Lord’s second coming, the date of Judgment day.

Before his resurrection, when he was in his state of humiliation and not exercising his divine knowledge to the fullest, Jesus had said he did not know the day of God’s judgment. ***“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”*** (Mark 13:32) Here he does not say, “I do not know,” but, “It is not for you to know.”

From Jesus’ words in the Bible we know that his kingdom is not political but spiritual. To Pontius Pilate ***“Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.’”*** (John 18:36)

We know that his kingdom is not limited to the Jewish people but includes all believers, the spiritual Israel. For example, Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus: ***“In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”*** (Ephesians 3:4-6)

We know that our Lord will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead.

His disciples were not to trouble their minds, not to busy their minds about when this was to happen. They had more important things to do. They were to preach the gospel to prepare people for the coming of Jesus Christ, so that many might believe in him and be saved.

His disciples were not to be concerned with what they could not know. Rather they were to be occupied with the great mission assignment that Jesus was giving them. Beginning at Jerusalem, they would go out as his witnesses in ever widening circles, first in Jerusalem, then in Judea. Judea is the area in which Jerusalem is located, the southern part of Palestine. Samaria is the area to the north, and finally they were to go to the ends of the earth.

Witnesses are people who tell what they have seen and heard. The apostles had seen his deeds and heard his words. They had witnessed his obedient life and death, and they had seen him alive from the dead. It would be their mission to tell this to the farthest parts of the earth. The book of Acts describes in part how they carried out that assignment. Through the writings of the New Testament – and the Old Testament – the disciples of Jesus continue to witness to this day.

What they had seen and heard qualified them to be witnesses. Power from the Holy Spirit would further equip them for this work. Here Jesus himself tells what the baptism with the Spirit will be. It will be a power that enables them and furnishes them with the gifts they need to proclaim Jesus and his work. For example, Peter would be able to testify clearly and fearlessly that God raised the crucified Jesus to life. “We are witnesses,” he could say. He did this on Pentecost, and he did it later near the temple, and he did it later again fearlessly before the Sanhedrin.

“You will be my witnesses” is a promise. We today, of course, are not witnesses in the same sense that the apostles were. But we have received the Holy Spirit who enables us to trust Christ, to know what he has done for us and for all people. This gives the ability and the responsibility to speak of him and his salvation, beginning at home and continuing in ever-widening circles.

“After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.” This is a miracle, not “special effects” such as we see in movies today. He really, truly ascended bodily into heaven and soon they could not see him any more.

Then we read ***“They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’”*** This being taken up and hidden from their sight made it clear that they must not expect him to establish a political kingdom with visible glory. It brought home to them that they must wait for the

promised Holy Spirit to empower them for their mission task. It signaled that he would no longer appear and disappear as he had been doing during the 40 days since his resurrection.

They didn't see the resurrection, but now they saw the Ascension. But from now on he would be hidden from their sight.

The "two men" were plainly angels. Their clothing and the message from God makes this clear. This appearance of two angels is similar to the appearance at the resurrection. Angels are invisible spirits, but at times they assumed human form to communicate with men.

The apostles kept straining to see Jesus after the cloud hid him from their sight. The question of the angels reminded them that they had a mission to carry out and that they must not spend their lives gazing at the sky. Jesus will be returning, and there is work to do before that moment.

The angels' words are also an answer to the disciples' question about the kingdom. The disciples would be workers in Jesus' kingdom of grace, bringing God's gracious rule into people's lives through the proclaiming of God's Word. The perfect fulfillment of that kingdom will occur when Jesus returns visibly.

Sometimes our children wonder just "where" heaven is. Jesus ascended. Well, the heaven to which Jesus ascended is not the sky with its stars and planets. It is not a place where Jesus is confined or to which he has retired to do no more work. It is the state of glory in which the One who shares our humanity enjoys all the power and glory which he had with the Father from eternity. Our epistle lesson tonight told us of God's power and that he is omnipresent, that is, present everywhere, in this way: ***"That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his 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 the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."*** (Ephesians 1:19-23)

Jesus rules us, his church. Our Savior did not retire and stop working when he ascended into heaven. He has not deserted us. He is involved in our lives and he is in charge even though we do not see him. He assured us ***"surely I am with you always."*** (Matthew 28:20)

The acts, the actions of the apostles and the church's work in every generation are his doing. This work is not only done for him; it is done by him and with his help.

He will return from heaven, visibly, the angels tell us. That is a fact, a certainty. He has ascended into heaven, but we are and can be sure that he will return. The fulfillment of that promise is repeated even in the last book of the Bible, where we read ***"Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen."*** (Revelation 1:7) All who believe in him will, of course, rejoice on that day!

May we joyfully be doing the work Jesus has given us to do as we await that final coming of our Lord and Savior! Amen.