

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 22, 2017

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

Hymns: 339, 252:1, 341, 352, 361.

Lessons: Psalm 47, Philippians 2:1-11, John 17:1-11.

Sermon Text: Hebrews 2:9.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

In our last sermon on the small catechism, we spoke of Jesus' humiliation. In the Christmas season, we saw the beginning of his years of humiliation, the approximately 33 years in which he lived on earth. He was "conceived by the Holy Ghost; born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead, and buried."

The creed goes on and we confess his exaltation in these words: "He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

Today we look briefly at

THE EXALTATION OF JESUS CHRIST

- 1. He descended into hell;**
- 2. The third day He rose again from the dead;**
- 3. He ascended into heaven;**
- 4. He is sitting on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; and**
- 5. He shall come to judge the living and the dead.**
- 6. As a result of faith in all this, we belong to Christ.**

After Christ accomplished his work on earth – the work of redemption – he was exalted. This means that as the God-man he again made full use of his heavenly power and glory. Because he suffered and "*humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross ... God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus 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.*" Philippians 2:8-11 (NIV)

Because of all that he did for mankind, "*we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor.*" Hebrews 2:9 (NIV) "*He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.*" Ephesians 4:10 (NIV)

How was Christ exalted? We see five phases of his exaltation. Christ was exalted first of all by descending into hell. So we need to understand very clearly why he descended into hell. Peter tells us plainly that "*he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.*" 1 Peter 3:19-20 (NIV)

Christ did not descend into hell to suffer for our sins; He suffered hell's torment on the Cross when he was forsaken by God, and our redemption was finished when he died. Nor did he descend into hell to preach the Gospel of grace to the damned, and to give them another chance to repent, for after death is judgment. Scripture is very clear that "*man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.*" Hebrews 9:27 (NIV) as we read in Hebrews.

By his descent into hell Jesus showed that he was Lord also over *“things under the earth.”* Philippians 2:10 (KJV)

By showing himself alive he proclaimed his victory over his enemies. The *“spirits in prison”* 1 Peter 3:19 (NIV) are the souls of men in hell, who during their lives on earth had been disobedient to his Gospel and had despised it in unbelief. “Preach” does not necessarily mean by word of mouth, but his mere appearance was sufficient evidence of his victory.

Christ descended into hell to assure us of his victory over the devil and all the evil angels.

Can you imagine how the devil felt; how the devil must’ve rejoiced; how the devil must’ve jumped for joy when Jesus died on the cross? At that point the devil thought he had won. If that is the way he felt, he must’ve forgotten the first Gospel promise recorded in Genesis 3:15 when God told him *“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”* Genesis 3:15 (NIV) Christ did not descend into hell to suffer the pains of hell. All that had been accomplished on the cross, as part of his humiliation.

After Christ descended into hell, he rose again from the dead on the third day, the day we celebrate as Easter Sunday. This assures us of three things: First that he is truly God’s son. Second that he is truly our Redeemer. Third that he will raise us from the dead. The Scriptures teach that on the third day Christ victoriously rose from the grave and showed himself alive to his disciples. Peter tells us in Acts that *“God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen--by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”* Acts 10:40-41 (NIV)

The book of Acts begins with Christ ascending into heaven forty days after his resurrection. This assures us that he is our Redeemer, and that there is a place where we will be with him forever. The following words from Scripture also assure us that he will come again. *“He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. 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.’”* Acts 1:9-11 (NIV)

Christ is in heaven and sits on the right hand of God. This assures us that he rules over all things for the good of his church. Scripture assures us of God’s *“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 (NIV) Jesus himself assures us *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”* Matthew 28:18 (NIV)

Christ’s sitting at the right hand of God must not be taken literally, as though he were confined to a certain place sitting on a throne next to the Father’s but figuratively. The right hand of God is his sovereign power and dominion. To sit at the right hand of God means to occupy a position of divine honor. In his divine nature Christ was always at the right hand of God, always wielding omnipotent power in ruling all things, but now also his human nature fully participates in this. Above all men, above all authorities is Christ, who uses all things on earth for his purposes. He is the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Sovereign Ruler of all things.

And now that Christ is seated at the right hand of God, the right hand of power and glory, he continues to carry out his office, his official duties of prophet, priest and king from his heavenly throne.

Christ carries out his office of prophet now by sending believers to share his good news with everyone. Shortly before ascending into heaven, he told his disciples, and that includes us as his disciples, to *“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”* Mark 16:15 (NIV)

Christ carries out his office of high priest now by pleading our case before God. What does that mean for us? Although our sins lie heavy on our conscience, the exalted Savior is our advocate with the Father. Whenever our sins trouble us, let us turn to Jesus, who, having atoned for our sins, pleads for us with the Father. *“We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.”* 1 John 2:1 (NIV)

Paul assures the Romans: ***“Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”*** Romans 8:34 (NIV)

Christ also carries out his office of King by protecting us from all our enemies in order to bring us safely to his heavenly Kingdom. So how is it that he protects us? Let's go back to the first article. God the Father is still protecting by defending me against all danger, guarding and protecting me from all evil. Christ did not stop pleading for mankind after he said while dying on the cross ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*** Luke 23:34 (NIV) Paul writes to Timothy: ***“The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”*** 2 Timothy 4:18 (NIV)

We are assured that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead on the last day. This too, is part of his exaltation because he will be doing this in his heavenly glory. No one knows when Christ will come to judge the living and the dead, and so we must be ready for Christ's second coming at any moment, even this very moment, right now. Christ will judge the living and dead on the basis of whether or not they believe in him and his Word.

Because God and his Son have done all these things for us, Luther added another paragraph in his catechism explanation. This paragraph talks about serving Christ: ***“All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally.”***

Why did Christ redeem me? So that I might be his own and use my whole life to serve him in his kingdom. Luther calls this life of service a life of righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. It is a life of righteousness because he covers all my sins with the robe of his righteousness. It is a life of innocence because in my new man I hate sin and desire to live a godly life. It is a life of blessedness because I gladly serve him in thankful love. But I can't do that perfectly while I'm here on earth. That can be done perfectly only when Jesus takes me to be with him in heaven.

Because Christ is my Lord, and I am his own, I should not live for myself, doing what pleases me, but unto Christ, doing what pleases him. The believer says with Paul ***“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*** Galatians 2:20 (NIV) ***“I have been crucified with Christ”*** means that I am dead to sin and must have nothing to do with it anymore; ***“but Christ lives in me.”*** He has taken possession of me, and controls my life Speaking of God, Paul says, ***“whose I am and whom I serve.”*** Acts 27:23 (NIV)

Everyone who truly believes that he is Christ's own will live under him in his kingdom of grace, and serve him in "righteousness", doing what is right in his sight; in "innocence", avoiding whatever might displease him; and in "blessedness", being free from fear, enjoying peace and happiness and hoping for more glorious things to come. The word "everlasting" points to the kingdom of glory, where we shall be with our dear Savior in eternal bliss. For "just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally", so certain it is that we also shall arise from death, live, and reign with him forever in the realms of glory.

Like the explanation of all three articles of the Creed, Luther concludes: ***“This is most certainly true.”*** Why am I sure that I will be with Christ in heaven? As Christ has bought me with His blood, I now belong to Him, and I am not my own master.

I am sure that I will be with Christ in heaven because he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true. He's telling the truth. This is no lie. Christ was exalted for you. Believe this, believe in the forgiveness of sins, and by faith, heaven will be yours! Amen.