

CHRIST ASCENDING WITH GREAT JOY AND BLESSING
Luke 24:44-53; Ascension (Observed); May 15-16, 2021

Then [Jesus] led [His disciples] out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands He blessed them. While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.

[GREETING]

As soon as this Sermon is finished we will stand and confess our faith using the Nicene Creed, especially that Jesus Christ “ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father.” The Ascension of Our Lord is one of four major festivals of Christ that the Church celebrates, along with Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter, though we have transferred the celebration from last Thursday, the fortieth day of Easter, the day on which Jesus actually ascended, to today.

And today is rightfully a joyful celebration. Christians in the Church take their directions from the apostles on that day who worshipped the ascended Jesus Christ with great joy and blessing. So today we worship the ascended Christ with great joy and blessing.

Usually, when someone we love is parted from us, we have the opposite reaction. Instead of joy and blessing, someone we love going away from us brings feelings of sadness and loss, especially if we think that we are never going to be able to see that person again. If that had been the case with the apostles and Jesus, that they knew that Jesus was going away and they were never going to see Him again, then they would have been sad at their loss.

But Jesus’ ascension is joyful and full of blessing because, even though Luke tells us here that Jesus **parted from them and was carried up into heaven**, he explained in Acts chapter one, our Second Reading today, that Jesus’ “parting” meant that He was “**out of their sight**,” not that He was gone. Jesus has not “gone away from us into heaven.” That is not what it means that He ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father. Jesus is still with us, though not seen.

Sometimes when a loved one has died I hear people say things like that person will always be with them in their thoughts. “We will keep him with us in our memories.” And there is some truth to this. God gives us memories of those we love as His gifts to us in this life. God’s Word in Psalm 103 reminds us to “forget not,” that is, “remember” all His “benefits” to us, that is, all the good God gives us. **Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits** (103:2). But our memories of a departed loved ones do not bring them back to us or keep them alive.

Jesus is not kept alive or brought to life to be with us by our memories. Jesus, though out of our sight, is with us because He has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. And His presence with us is both Spiritual and physical.

The Spiritual presence of the ascended Lord Jesus is through the Holy Spirit coming and working through the Word of Christ. Before Jesus ascended into heaven He opened the apostles’ **minds to understand the Scriptures**. This caused their joy and blessing. How this understanding would be theirs Jesus explained. **And behold, I am sending the Promise of My Father upon you**. This is the promised Holy Spirit whom, Jesus, the Son of God, would send on His apostles and the Church in just ten days on the Day of Pentecost, the final major festival of the Church Year which we will celebrate next Sunday, the fiftieth day of Easter.

What understanding of the Holy Scriptures does the Holy Spirit give? Jesus tells us: **That everything written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled... That the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations**. In other words, all of God’s Old Testament promises were kept and fulfilled when God’s Son, Jesus Christ, came into this world as true Man to suffer, die on the cross, and rise from the dead on the third day.

We should be and are be sorry for our sins, yet, in faith we repent of them and joyfully receive God’s forgiveness of them for Jesus’ sake. Jesus died and rose so that, even though we will die, we will rise with Him to ascend with Him to be with our heavenly Father forever.

This Good News of repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ is for all people from all nations. The joy and blessing of Jesus' ascension that filled the apostles and the Church then, and fills us with great joy now and blesses us, is to go into the whole world that all who believe and are baptized will be saved.

The work of the Holy Spirit is to bring Jesus Christ among us in the preaching and teaching of His Word. The Holy Spirit brings people to faith in Jesus and incorporates them into His body, the Church, to worship Him in Spirit and truth. All that the Holy Spirit does is **“in His name,”** that is, Jesus' name.

Besides this Spiritual presence of Jesus with His Church in the world we are blessed with the physical presence of God's Son. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He parted from His disciples in that they could no longer see Him in the flesh even though God's Son in the flesh remained with them.

There are some people who claim that it is the nature of being physically human that we cannot be in more than one place at a time; my body cannot be here in the pulpit and at the same time sitting in the pew next to you, which is true. Then they apply this to the physical human body of Jesus Christ. As true God the Son, Jesus Christ can be everywhere they concede, but His physical body ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father, as if God the Father's "right hand" is a physical space in heaven, they say. They are wrong to think that Jesus' human nature is in any way restricted like ours is.

Jesus Christ is both true God and true man in one person. And because of this, His human nature is not restricted like ours is. A Bible verse that makes this very point is in 1 John 4. **“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God”** (4:2). St. John uses the perfect tense of the verb “to come,” **has come**. In Greek the perfect tense describes something that has a beginning in the past but continues on into the future. God's Son became flesh at His incarnation, **“The Word became flesh,”** (Jn 1:14) and will continue to have that human flesh forever. Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and continues to be with us in that flesh.

Another Bible verse that makes this same point is one we are all familiar with from the Words of Institution of the Lord's Supper, where Jesus promises of the bread He took and blessed, "**This is My body, which is given for you.**" And of the cup of wine, Jesus promises: "**This is... My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.**" The same body and blood that was given and shed on the cross for the forgiveness of sins, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven is present and given into our mouths to eat and to drink. Jesus did not ascend into heaven to lock up His body so that it would not be accessible to us now in the New Testament Church.

One of the things that Jesus fulfilled from the Old Testament Church was the place where God promised to be with His people. In the Old Testament, God promised to be in the Holy of Holies over the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant, which eventually was permanently located in the temple in Jerusalem. When Jesus was born, the location where God promised to be among His people was no longer in a building made by human hands but with the incarnate Son of God. Until Jesus Christ came among us you would have to go to Jerusalem to be where God promised to be present to forgive your sins. Since God became flesh and dwelt among us, we don't go to Jerusalem to come into the Holy of Holies but to the altar of the Church in all nations where Jesus comes among us in His body and blood to forgive our sins and save us from death.

One of the things that I do to remind myself that the incarnate Christ is here with me to forgive and save me is to bow at the words I confess of Jesus Christ in the Nicene Creed, "and was made man." And when the pastor is consecrating the elements of bread and wine at the altar for the Lord's Supper, when Jesus' words are spoken, "this is My body," I bow, and at, "This cup is the New Testament in My blood," I bow. Jesus blesses me with His body and blood so I can worship Him with great joy.

There are only two times in St. Luke's Gospel that Jesus was worshiped with "**great joy**": by the angels at the announcement of His birth to the shepherds, and by the apostles at His ascension. We worship Jesus today for His ascension, with great joy and with His blessing, confessing that He still comes to us in His flesh. Amen.