

**Ascension of the Lord**  
**Acts 1:1-11   Ephesians 1:15-23   Luke 24:44-53**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**May 13, 2021 (Traditional)**

I like the old joke: How many Lutherans does it take to change a lightbulb? The answer is three: one to change the bulb, and two to reminisce about how good the old one was. It's a good one for today as we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord. "He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father." The Ascension is Jesus' coronation as King of the Universe. This is where God affirms that the one who suffered and died on the cross, is Lord of all creation. Now you and I can be sure of who rules—no matter how many people try to rule, no matter how messed up the world is—we know who holds the future in his hands. The one who hung on the cross is the beginning and the end.

One thing you see in the first lesson, from Acts: the disciples have trouble letting Jesus ascend. They don't want to let him go. They want to hold onto him. It's probably a good thing I wasn't there; I picture myself 500 feet in the air, hanging onto Jesus' foot. He'd have to shake me off. How awkward would that be. But it's understandable; the disciples are feeling helpless. It's like, "wait a second—you're leaving us...*here?*" "How long do we have to wait before you come back?" "What are we supposed to do while you're gone?" And then, after he's lifted up, they just stand there, looking up into the empty sky. They're feeling lost. They're feeling that separation. What can we focus on now, now that our focus is gone? For them, the Ascension feels at first like it's just a horribly sad goodbye. Like, they had all that joy at the resurrection, beyond all hope...but now Jesus is leaving them *again*.

Karen and I just said goodbye to our daughter Eleanor who left for an internship last week. She's going to have a great experience. We know that, but we're feeling that emptiness in our hearts. I was in the basement going through boxes a couple days ago, and wouldn't you know it, I came across Eleanor's favorite stuffed animal when she was growing up—a little lamb that she kept at her side at all times. Holding that lamb in my hands just about broke my heart. It's no longer just a toy—it's the sign of an amazing time in my life as a dad, and that time is now passed. It is never coming back. And that's kind of what's happening with the disciples in the first lesson. All they see at the Ascension is Jesus leaving them.

We can think of it this way: this is the big point in scripture where the disciples could no longer live just by what they see. Now they need to live by faith. They need to live by Jesus' Word, by his promise. And he had told them that he's going away so that he could be *closer* to them. He leaves—he ascends—so that people *everywhere* can have *immediate* access to Him. The Ascension is not about Jesus becoming *absent*, at all! The disciples would not have him in that *particular way* anymore—as that man with that particular face and those hands and those feet—walking beside them anymore. Now the disciples would have Jesus' Words—his promise—that he would be closer to them

spiritually and yes, *physically* closer...than ever. Now they have to live by faith rather than sight. That's always hard for us.

It's mind-blowing to realize that through faith, you and I right here, have closer access to Jesus than the twelve disciples, who could actually see him, and who followed him around Palestine. People travel to the ends of the earth looking for some kind of special, mystical experience of God. You and I can come to an altar here in Grove City Ohio where the almighty God of the universe is going to give himself to us today in bread and wine so completely that he literally becomes part of us, and we part of him. We can't get closer to God than what God is doing for us right here.

So the Ascension is not about Jesus becoming *absent* from his followers! He left from sight so that he could be close to all of us by faith. And now, as part of that, we can be sure that throughout our lives as believers, Jesus is going to come to us in so many ways, through so many people, through so many events in our lives. We know Christ always comes to us, reliably through the Word, through the Sacraments, through his people. But along with those reliable ways that he's given to me through his promise, I can also point to a hundred different people, a hundred different events, by which Jesus has changed my life forever.

For example, I remember Pastor Dallman's excellent sermons growing up. He was a great preacher, and played a big role in shaping my faith from an early age. So what happened when Pastor Dallman left my hometown congregation? I remember feeling that deep loss. That period in my life was never going to come back. But today's lesson speaks to exactly that situation: as I supposed to stand there, looking up at the sky, wondering to God, "why have you left me?" Well...am I living by faith or am I living by sight? Think of it this way: was Pastor Dallman's preaching supposed to lead me to Pastor Dallman—or was it supposed to point me to the resurrected Jesus, who has promised me that he is going to keep coming to me through Word and Sacrament, through the church, in ten thousand new and unexpected ways before I die?

The time and the people change, but God's Word remains. Faith is knowing that even though things are always changing, even though the people God works through in our lives are always coming and going: it's the same promise, and it's the same resurrection power Jesus is pouring out on us. If we get stuck on the past—if I stay in the basement looking at a stuffed animal for too long, reminiscing and pining for a beauty that I've lost—I might miss the new and deeper beauties that God is going to show me. Even in death, even in the losses we experience, he's giving himself to us, in all his fullness. I personally think that one of God's intentions in coming to us through earthly vessels that break—through churches that go through ups and downs, through leaders who come and go, through Christian friendships and relationships that go through different phases—one of God's intentions in coming to us through these earthly vessels that break, is to keep us faithful and on our toes. God is lovingly asking us: are you living by faith, or by sight?

When someone or something I've been relying on as a believer changes, or goes away, it makes me ask myself, am I being faithful to God *because of who God is*? Or am I just in

love with the particular instrument he's using to get through to me right now? All the earthly vessels break. And it's OK. Because faith in the resurrected Lord fills us with this confidence, this expectation, that when one vessel breaks, he's about to do something amazing and new.

So if, as individuals, or as members of any congregation, we find ourselves stuck...and it's easy to get stuck these days because these are anxious times we're living in...But if we find ourselves constantly looking back at those times when everything was supposedly better, if we're holding on to people and memories and events that are gone...if these beautiful things which have passed away out of sight are causing us to stand still and look up at the sky helplessly, then we need to hear what the disciples heard from the two strangers: "Suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'"

In other words, first of all, *let go*. Those beautiful vessels through which God came to us so powerfully in the past—they live. We do not see them, but they are shining brightly with God right now. In Jesus Christ, that is an everlasting beauty. We can believe that, and we can let those people and memories go...lift them up to God with thanks. Let go, and stop looking up at the sky feeling helpless. We can start praising God with a new song today, with new actions, with new service. All of us here are broken vessels, we know that. God is at work in broken vessels. God is always about to do something new and amazing. Lovingly let go of those old vessels, those people, those memories—give them up, let them finally ascend to the glory of God. And prepare to receive the living Lord in all the hundreds of new ways he is going to find, to pour his divine life into yours.