

*Sermon for the Ascension of Our Lord, 5.v.2005, 7:30 p.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle/Brogue, Pennsylvania
Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53
Solemn Vespers with Holy Communion*

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

Then He led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up His hands, He blessed them. While He was blessing them, He withdrew from them and was carried up into Heaven.

-- Luke 24:50

In addition to Luke's narrative of the Ascension, there is but one other account. That is found in Mark 16:19, where the earliest of the four Evangelists writes in that straightforward and unadorned way that is characteristic of his whole Gospel: "So then the Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to them, was taken up into Heaven and sat down at the right hand of God." Luke tells us more. I invite us to hear *Luke's* account this Ascension Day. I invite us to meet the risen and glorified Christ in Luke's careful addition.

In Luke and John in the Gospel according to Saint John, Jesus is emphatic about His concern for what will become of the Disciples after He is with them no longer. The period after Easter is a kind of interregnum in which Jesus recapitulates all He has taught them

about the Kingdom of God and in which He tries to prepare the Disciples for His second departure. It is difficult for us to imagine how dependent they were on Him and what emotions must have overwhelmed them after His rising from the dead, including the heightened anxiety about the possibility that He would leave them again. This was not only a possibility. It was a definite reality, and Jesus had done nothing to shield the Disciples from that fact.

But the bond that joined them together was one of love, and that love was mutual. If the Disciples feared losing Jesus once more, so did Jesus dread leaving them. If His humanity was real, then He would miss in particular the Big Fisherman's rough, impulsive good-heartedness and well meant misstatements. He would miss John's friendship, one that, as with the best of friends, required no words. He would miss Mary Magdalene, too, and perhaps most of all, though He had to keep her passionate, bold and courageous love at arm's length lest it explode out of all control. And He would, would He not, miss His Blessed Mother, whose sinless womb and whose arms and lullabies and whose awe-struck and worried love had been His whole world. What would be come of them? Would John take

care of His Mother as her own son? What would become of Martha and Mary and Lazarus, especially if Lazarus took ill again? What of Phillip? Would he keep his joyful smile and open face and heart? His human heart and mind surely asked these questions as, according to Luke, He raised His arms and blessed them.

But also in His Godhead that hour must have been almost impossible. *Finally*, God Whose sheer love had created and sustains all things had found *friends*, those who loved Him for Himself, those who loved to be with Him, just to be with Him, those who loved His words, those who loved His laugh, those who wept for Him as well. *When*, since the foundation of the universe, had *anyone* shed a tear for God?! Oh, to be sure, they had served Him while most had chosen to serve only themselves. They had stood in awe of Him and feared Him while others had ignored Him or pretended He did not exist. They had loved and even kept His law while others had looked for loopholes around that law. And they had even endured a martyr's death for Him in their hundreds of thousands, in their millions, perhaps. But who had *loved* Him before this rag-tag group of nobodies, as far as the world was concerned, the Disciples of Jesus of

Nazareth. How He loved them! How Almighty God *treasured* them, every one of them, perhaps even the one who had betrayed Him!

He blessed them all, and blessed them, and blessed them again, even as He withdrew from them, because it was time, Heaven's time and the will of God in which was His whole purpose and delight. But He went on blessing them until the last moment, until He had vanished from their sight into a Heaven they could not see. The Christian artist who painted the Ascension scene we have used for the cover of our service bulletin has Our Lord's eyes still focused on those He must now leave as He blesses them. He blesses them with the hands that had performed such wonders of healing, the hands that had suffered so terribly. He misses them already. He loves them more intensely than before, with an everlasting love that will save all who turn to it in every age, a love that will change history and the world forever.

They would have to *believe* in that in order for their joy and their faith in His promise to overcome their brokenness of heart. And they *do* believe. They choose to live their lives on the basis of things not seen, but things nonetheless real, the things of God and the

promises of God. *Look* where they go after the Ascension—to the *Temple*, to that very place where they were most likely to be seen, identified and apprehended! They have lost their fear, the fear that had kept them cooped up in a locked room together. They have lost their fear, for there is nothing more to dread, nothing that can touch them, nothing which has not already touched Him, nothing which He has not already overcome for their sakes!

You are His Disciples! He misses *you* with all His heart! He will overcome every barrier to remind you of His love for you, so that you *never* forget, not for a week, not for a single day. For *you* He has instituted the Means of Grace through the ordered ministry of His one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, *bathing* you in His forgiveness, *adopting* you in the waters of your Baptism. He *anoints* you with the sacred oil of your priestly heritage as a member of His Church and as His own child at your spiritual birth, when health fails you and when the shadows of this life finally lengthen and the evening of your departure from this vale of tears comes. He *feeds* your hunger for God with His own glorified Body and *quenches* your thirst for righteousness with His own most innocent Blood, with His

very life within you, that you may know His presence and *be* that real presence of Christ to others. He *blesses you in marriage and in family*, as He once blessed a young couple at a little village wedding. He is there for you when you have done wrong and squandered His grace, *hearing* your heart through the confession of your lips with compassion and *releasing* you from every bond with a love that is always greater than your sins. He holds you *that dear!* He misses you and cares about you *that much!*

And in all of that, in the life of the Church of which you are a part, in the means of grace instituted by Christ for *your* sake, there is One present and active Whom the Disciples had yet to know, as Luke tells their story. There, in what felt like an abyss of separation as Jesus withdraws from those He loves, a new possibility opens up, for it is in that gap, in that space of apparent emptiness in the heart, that the Holy Spirit acts to create faith, to save hope and to empower love. God the Holy Spirit is in so many ways the antithesis of the God the Disciples had met in Christ Jesus: *not* seen, *not* known in a personal way, manifest in *power* rather than in suffering humility, as yet the undefined promise of God the Father. Jesus offers the Disciples—

who have not yet become the Church—the first blessing of that new possibility, namely, something to which they may look *forward*, a *hope* that may take the place of *loss*. It will be in that looking forward, in *that* hope, that the Church will be born through the wind and fire of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit is no ‘God of the gaps,’ that is, a kind of cheap prop theologians and preachers drag into the gaps of their own thinking, when and where they can think of nothing else to say. But the Holy Spirit does work in a very real *gap*, in that very place where God is felt to be absent, where hope has fled and given way to despair, in that gap in which our lives seem defined more by loss than by being or purpose. Right there, where we have let go of all expectations that would limit our faith in God, where the belief in Providence as a guaranteed and divinely ordained happy ending has been set out on the curb with the garbage and recycling, the Holy Spirit is able to create faith in the blessing of a Savior Who has withdrawn from our sight, to transform words of an ancient text that might have remained inscrutable marks on a page to us into God’s own testament of love, to give a meaning at which the world would

never guess to a crust of bread and a sip of wine, our link, for the time being, with the One Who has forgotten none of us, Who misses each of us and Who is with us in His waiting for us until our final hour and the end of time. Come, Lord Jesus! ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

S. D. G. !