

4 May 2005
Eve of the Ascension

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Jesus Ascends to Be With Us Always”
Text: Matthew 28:16-20 (Ephesians 4:7-13)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw Him they worshiped Him, but some doubted.

That’s an amazing statement, that last verse, isn’t it? ***They worshiped Him, but some doubted.*** And actually, a most literal translation of that verse could read: ***they worshiped Him, but they doubted.*** They doubted. Not *some* of them, but *all* of them. The Eleven. All eleven of those confused, shaky, cowardly, uncertain, let’s just go fishing disciples! That they even made it to that mountain in Galilee at all can only be a miracle of God’s grace and mercy! Because they still didn’t have it figured out. They still didn’t know quite what was going on, or what to expect. They still had doubts and questions. They were still . . . well, let’s face it – *the same old Eleven!* The same group (minus Judas) that had exasperated Jesus for three years.

Yet as I was studying this verse, I was amazed at the reluctance of most commentators to admit this. Most were extremely hesitant to attribute any doubt or uncertainty to the Eleven at all! Instead, they said this was a reference back 40 days to when Thomas doubted. Or they said that this referred to *other* disciples who doubted, but not to the Eleven. Or they said this meant that they had doubted *before* – like when staring into the empty tomb, or when they were behind those locked doors – *but no longer*. . . . But that’s not what it says, is it? It says: ***they worshiped, but they doubted.*** They weren’t perfectly steadfast. Their minds were divided. They were torn. They . . . *they were just like us!*

For is this not a perfect description of the situation we often find ourselves in? We worship. We believe. We are here, receiving God’s good and gracious gifts. We confess Him in the Creeds, we read His Word, we pray His prayer. *And yet we doubt.* We hear what Jesus said, that ***I am with you always . . . and yet we doubt.*** When disasters happen in our world; when things in our lives aren’t working out as we hoped or planned; when it seems as if it’s just me against the world; when loneliness, or anxiety, or uncertainty, or

fear creep into our hearts and minds. *We worship, but we doubt.* We believe, and yet we wonder: *where are you when I need you?* But why do we wonder? He was here when we needed Him. In the manger, in the Jordan, in the wilderness, in the homes of sinners, and finally on the cross. Why not now? Why not still? But like the Eleven, we're not perfectly steadfast. We find ourselves divided. Our mind and emotions are torn. And we are forced to our knees, to repent, and to pray the prayer of those who worship and who doubt: ***Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief!*** (Mk 9:24)

Well to do that very thing is *exactly why* Jesus ascended to His Father! He ascends to answer our prayers, in all places and at all times. He ascends to help and forgive us divided and confused and doubting disciples. He ascends that we might believe. And that is why we are here this night, and why we are celebrating this great day. To remember that Jesus' ascension does not mean that He is gone and that we are now on our own – but that He ascended *in order to be with us always; in order* (as we heard from Ephesians) *to fill all things; in order* to continue His work of salvation by sending His Spirit to be with us and in us through the work of His Church. That though we worship and we doubt, that *He would keep us firm in His Word and faith until we die, for this is His good and gracious will.* (Small Catechism, explanation to the Third Petition)

And so Jesus ascends, but He doesn't leave. We know this because we read in the book of Acts the verse that is printed on the cover of the bulletin this evening. That when Jesus ascended, ***He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight.*** (Acts 1:9) He went into a cloud. Not a rain cloud, but the same cloud that was at His transfiguration. The same cloud that descended into the Tabernacle and the Temple. The same cloud that led Israel to the Promised Land. *The cloud that was the sign and guarantee of the presence of God.* And so Jesus ascends into Heaven, which means not a place, but into the realm of God. And in the realm of God, He is no longer within our ordinary limits – but now as our crucified and risen Saviour, as the God-man, exercises the whole power and authority of God. **For us.** And even though He does not show Himself to our eyes anymore, He is still with us. As He promised. With us to serve us, to speak to us, to wash us, to feed us, to faith us, to forgive us, to save us.

And that we could be sure of this, He had to ascend. For suppose Jesus had gone on showing Himself as He did before His resurrection. Where would He be this evening? Here, or in some other church? Here in America, or in New Guinea, or Europe, or Africa, or where? And if so, we would say: *If He is there, then He is not here.* But because Jesus ascended, we, His children, no matter where we are, know that He is with us. Here and there present, for He now fills all things. Just *how*, we do not know and cannot figure out. But we know that it is true, for we have His promise. And He is with us now even more powerfully than when men saw Him.

But our Lord knows what we need. And so because He will no longer be seen, at His ascension He gives us what *can* be seen, that we may know where He is for us, where His gifts are located, and how to receive them. We heard it twice, in fact. In Ephesians we are told that He ascended, and so ***He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers***, for you. ***To equip the saints; for the work of the ministry; for building up the body of Christ.*** To give you His gifts. And then we heard those familiar words from Matthew. He tells the Eleven to go and give what He has given them to give: ***Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*** And so it is not every man (or woman!) for themselves! We are not on our own. Jesus ascended so that He would be with us and **for us**. So that His death and resurrection would be present for us. So that His body and blood would be present here for us. So that through His Church, His gifts would be here for us, and given to us. That though we worship and we doubt, our doubt would be forgiven, our faith strengthened, and His peace and joy would rule in our hearts and lives.

And all of this we have, for we have Him – or should I say, He has us! And if He has us, then we shall be where He is. And so we will. For He will one day come for each of us, and take us to be with Him in Heaven, in the presence of God. That doesn't mean He's not here with us now – again, He most certainly is! He is now with us always. Today, tomorrow, and forever. But He comes to us *now* not to take us, but for another reason: to bless and keep us; to make His face shine upon us and be gracious to us; to look upon us with favor, and give us peace. . . . When He's ready, He will take us. For Jesus has now finished the way to victory for us, with His ascension. And so now He leads us that way, gives us strength and courage for it, and will finally bring us to His home. Through life, through death, through resurrection, and finally through ascension. From our first day, until we enter the day that will never end, He is with us. Today, we know it! **We know it, because He ascended.**

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.