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Eve of the Ascension of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Lifting Up His Hands”
Text: Luke 24:50-53

(Portions of this sermon taken and adapted from Selected Sermons of Norman Nagel, © 2004 CPH, p. 144-146)

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

“ . . . and lifting up his hands he blessed them.”

We're not told exactly what Jesus said as He blessed His disciples that day. But neither do we need to know. We need only to look at those hands raised in blessing and consider them, and we shall know. For those hands are no ordinary hands.

They are the hands that touched His mother Mary in all their human littleness and frailty. They are the hands that learned to hold a pen and write the words of Scripture that Jesus knew so well by the time He was 12 years old.

They are the hands that worked with hammer and saw, sharing and blessing our work with us.

True human hands.

These are also the hands that touched the eyes of the blind and made them see, and the tongues of the dumb and made them speak.

These are the hands that had taken hold of the pale, cold, lifeless hand of a little girl and gave her back alive again to her father and mother.

These are the hands that Jesus so often stretched out, and touched, and grasped with, with that personal, individual love that marks the healings of Jesus. He did not heal people by the dozens, mass healings, people all lumped together; but was there for each one that needed Him as His hands took hold of each one.

True divine hands.

And these are the hands that gathered little children into His arms to hug them and bless them.

These are the hands that gripped Peter when he looked away from Jesus and began to sink. These are the hands that broke the blessed bread and gave His body to eat.

These are the hands that Thomas held and which conquered all his doubt.

True saving hands.

And how much more could I mention about these hands?

All this the ascension hands of Jesus say – and we have not yet mentioned the biggest thing of all, that in those hands we see the print of the nails. The jagged scar that tells us the full size of this blessing and how it was won for us. The one who ascends and blesses has the marks of the cross in His hands. For **no cross, no blessing**. That is why the sign of the cross is made with the blessing – with the body and with the hand. For that is what Jesus means to us at His ascension: life and blessing won and given. Life and blessing for us. Life and blessing to us.

True blessing hands.

“While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.”

While He blessed them, with His cross hands. He didn't bless them, and *then* leave – one last thing to give before His work is done. No. We are told that His blessing continues *as* He is parting, for it does not end. The work and blessing of our Lord is not over and done, but continues, only now in a new way. All that was gone was the sight of Jesus, but He did not leave. **“Lo, I am with you always”** He promises (Mt 28:20). And so He is. Only now even more powerfully than when men saw Him! For now He is ascended to the right hand of God, which is not a place as we think of it, but the exercise of the whole power of God, *which is now in the hands of Jesus*. In those loving hands. Those healing hands. Those caring hands. Those “each individual important” hands. The whole power of God, in the hands of our brother, who loved us so much that He laid down His life for us. And so He ascends not to leave us, but in order to be with us in all times and in all places. He ascends for our good; those hands that gave life still giving life, and still blessing. Only now it is we who are beneath them. Receiving from Him all the life and blessing that He has to give.

True eternal hands.

“And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.”

They were continually in the temple, *blessing God*. But with what could *they* bless *God*? Jesus had lifted His hands to bless them, but how had they lifted their hands? How do we? Do we lift them in blessing, or in sin? To help, or to hurt? In service, or in selfishness? To benefit others, or ourselves? To give, or to take? To heal, or to harm? In love, or in hate? What about the word that Jesus had spoken before: **“If your right hand causes you to sin,**

cut it off and throw it away?” (Mt 5:30) With what do we have to bless God? Why do we even have hands at all?

Well we do, because of those cross hands, lifted in blessing. Those **cross hands** that took our sin away from us, and blessed us with the gift of forgiveness. For His hands were cut off, so that our hands would not. He was condemned, so that we would not. He died, so that we might live. And so as we live under those **blessing hands** of our Saviour, *we bless Him* by repenting of our sins that He atoned for, and by receiving the gift and blessing of forgiveness He wants to give us. That is what we give to Him – for He needs nothing from you. **He wants you.** *And so faith that is born from His Word acknowledges the gift received in thankfulness and praise.* (LW Introduction, p. 6) And so we too “bless the Lord” as the disciples did, giving Him the sacrifice of lives of thanksgiving and praise, for we too have received the blessings of faith and forgiveness, life and salvation, from the **eternal hands** of our Lord.

“Then he led them out as far as Bethany . . .”

One last physical journey with His disciples. So much had happened. They had come so far. It was truly a time of great joy. And so where does Jesus lead His disciples? To Bethany, we are told. An historical coincidence? Hardly. For consider:

Bethany was the place where Jesus had begun His earthly ministry, for it is the place where He had been baptized by John (Jn 1:28). And so He ends where He began – the Lamb of God that John had first pointed out, now ascending with His blood behind the veil of heaven.

Bethany was the place where Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead (Jn 11:1). And so He is now here raised into Heaven, as we sang: *to raise our human nature on the clouds to God’s right hand.* (TLH #218 v. 5)

Bethany is the place where Jesus was anointed with oil before His crucifixion; anointed beforehand for His burial (Jn 12:1ff). And so now raised from the dead, *the conqu’ror mounts in triumph* (TLH #218 v. 1), the oil of death now the oil of joy.

And as if all that weren’t enough, there is one more thing: **Bethany** traditionally marked the last station of rest for pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem. And so it is Jesus’ final place before His ascension, **and it is our final place**, as we travel as pilgrims through this world to the New Jerusalem of Heaven. Oh, not in the physical place of Bethany do we gather – rather **our Bethany** is wherever we gather under the hands of our Lord. His human hands, His divine hands, His saving hands, His cross hands, His blessing hands, His eternal hands. For under His hands we are in His hands. His hands which baptize us, absolve us, feed us, and

bless us. His hands which give us life, see us through this life, and lead us in His way. Until the day when He returns, when we will rest from our labors, and He brings *us* – finally! – to the bright cloud of Heaven.

No wonder the disciples were filled with joy! Let us also be, for *we* too are blessed – now and forever.

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