

16 May 2007
The Ascension of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Rejoicing in His Ascension”

Text: Luke 24:44-53

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

We began the Festival Half of the Church year by remembering the descent of the Son of God for us – that (as we confess in the Creed) He “*came down from Heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man.*” He took our flesh and blood, He took upon Himself our human nature, in order to redeem us. And so we followed this work through the church year – as we considered His baptism in the Jordan and His miracles and teaching in Epiphany, as we journeyed to the cross in Lent, and as we rejoiced in His triumph and resurrection at Easter.

But there is yet one more task to be accomplished. As if all of that weren’t enough, there is one more step in the work of our redemption – and that is what we remember tonight: **His ascension**. And like all His other work, this too is *for us*. Not for His benefit does He ascend back from where He descended, but for *our* benefit. That as the heavens are now opened to Him, as both God *and* man, so too are they now opened for us men. Our sin forgiven, our death defeated, and the grip of Satan broken. That we not only be restored to the place that we lost in sin, *but taken even higher* – to the very throne of God. And this we confessed in the hymn we just sang:

*He has raised our human nature On the clouds to God’s right hand;
There we sit in heavenly places, There with Him in glory stand.
Jesus reigns, adored by angels; Man with God is on the throne.
By our mighty Lord’s ascension We by faith behold our own. (LSB #494, v.5)*

And this is true for us in Christ because we have been baptized into Christ. He is the head and we are His body, and where the head is, there is the body also. And so if we have been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, then we are also with Him in His ascension. For just as Jesus died and rose for us, to take us through death and into life, so now He ascends for us, to take us from this life to life everlasting!

But before Jesus ascended, He did something very significant and important – which we dare not overlook. Something that I believe is the reason why His disciples *rejoiced* at His ascension, instead of crying. (For crying is usually what we do when a loved one leaves!) But before He ascended, “*He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.*” For Jesus wanted them to understand what they would now witness. And so one last “Bible Study”; one last pass through the *Old Testament*, so that they would know, believe, and rejoice.

And the same is true for us modern-day disciples. Knowing the *Old Testament* will help us understand and rejoice on this day of Jesus’ ascension. And again, the hymn that we just sang does that for us. For it brings to our attention several Old Testament figures, to open the Scriptures to us and help us understand the work that Christ has accomplished for us in His ascension. So let us tonight sit with the disciples at Jesus’ feet, briefly take a look at these figures, and see how Christ has fulfilled and surpassed them all. So that we too know, believe, and rejoice.

And the first figure we come across is Enoch:

*He who walked with God and pleased Him, Preaching truth and doom to come,
He, our Enoch, is translated To His everlasting home.* (LSB #494, v.3)

It is in Genesis chapter 5 that we read of Enoch, and how he did not experience death but was taken directly and bodily to heaven. And how great was that! *But how much greater is Christ*, who is not only Himself bodily taken to heaven, but who takes all who live in Him by faith *with Him*! While Enoch is only one, Christ in His ascension takes His entire Church!

Then next we hear of Aaron:

Now our heav’nly Aaron enters With His blood within the veil; (LSB #494, v.4)

Aaron was the original high priest. And so with him we are reminded of the Old Testament Tabernacle and Temple, and the sacrifices that had to be made every morning and evening, and the blood that the High Priest had to take behind the veil, into the Holy of Holies, once every year on the Day of Atonement. And while the presence of God in the Tabernacle and Temple was a great gift to His people, *how much greater is Christ*, who not only tabernacled among us, but in His own blood offered the sacrifice for all sins once and for all on the cross! And in His ascension, our great High Priest, our “heav’nly Aaron,” has now taken us *with Himself and His*

blood, behind the veil – our sin atoned for! – and into the presence of God!

Next came Joshua:

Joshua now is come to Canaan, And the kings before Him quail.

Now He plants the tribes of Israel In their promised resting place. (LSB #494, v.4)

Moses could not take the people of Israel into the Promised Land, and Moses cannot take us into the Promised Land. We cannot enter through the Law. It is only through another. And so another leads the people through the waters of the Jordan and into the Promised Land. And it is no accident or coincidence that his name was Joshua, for that is the Hebrew rendering of the Greek name Jesus, who in His ascension takes us to our promised land of rest in Heaven. And that happens through water – the waters of the Jordan, through which Joshua crossed and in which Jesus was baptized, and the waters of baptism that join us to our Joshua.

And then finally, there is Elijah:

Now our great Elijah offers Double portion of His grace. (LSB #494, v.4)

And we remember when the great prophet Elijah was taken up into Heaven, and how when He left a double portion of his spirit was given to the one who would come after him, the prophet Elisha. But again, how much greater has Christ provided for the ones who would come after Him, for His Church, when, as we will celebrate in just ten days now, He ascended in order to give us not just double, but the fullness of His Spirit at Pentecost!

And so through these Old Testament figures – Enoch, Aaron, Joshua, and Elijah – we see all that is now ours in our exalted Christ. And so how could we *not* rejoice? For Jesus ascended in order to give us great gifts, and then promised He would come again for us, to take us to be with Him where He is. . . . But until that visible and glorious return, He is not locked up in Heaven! But comes to us, here and now, in Holy Baptism, Holy Gospel, and Holy Communion, giving us His gifts of forgiveness, life, salvation, and Spirit. He ascends so we need not wait for these, but have them already now! So come and receive them from your Lord. For His ascension means not that He is gone, but that He is present in a new way for us, giving us even now a foretaste of the promised feast to come.

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