

20 May 2009
Eve of the Ascension of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Restoration of Man”

Text: Luke 24:44-53; Ephesians 1:15-23; Acts 1:1-11

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

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] Alleluia!

When God created the heavens and the earth, the crown of His creation was the creation of man. Only man was made in the image and likeness of God - no animal or angel was given that honor. Only man was given dominion over the earth to subdue it - no animal or angel was given that responsibility. Only man was a being both physical and spiritual - physical like the animals, and spiritual like the angels. All things were created for man, to use, to enjoy, to rule.

But then everything changed, as sin turned the world upside down. The honor of man was turned to shame, his responsibility abdicated in rebellion. The image of God was cast off, and now the actions of men make angels blush, and men so steeped in sin and death live more in the likeness of animals than the likeness of God. Human nature suffered a catastrophic fall.

None of that is news to you, but it is important to remember as we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord today. For the reason why Jesus now ascends is because He first descended from heaven. The Son of God did not come to meet us half-way, but to raise us from the very depths of our sin and death. For if while perfect, man fell into sin, can we who now are born and live in sin, do any better? No. There must be one to come and raise us. There must be one to come and restore us to where we once were. And since no man could do that, it was God Himself who came - to join us in our depths, so we could once again join Him in the heights from which we fell.

That is what we have been remembering as we live through the church year - this work of Jesus for us and for our salvation. His incarnation and birth, His perfect life and sacrificial death, His triumphant resurrection, and tonight, the final step: His ascension. For Jesus' ascension was not for Him, a reward for a job well-done. This too was for us. For in Jesus, man is restored to His glory. In Jesus, man once again has dominion over creation. In Jesus, the fall of man is reversed. In Jesus, man is no longer in the depths, but now seated at the right-hand of God, **“far above all rule**

and authority and power and dominion . . . with all things under His feet.” What once was true for man in Adam, is now again true for us in the second Adam, Jesus Christ.

That is why 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)

It’s all *for you*.

That is why the disciples were “filled with joy” when they saw Jesus ascend. You would think that watching their friend and Saviour depart from them would have been an occasion for sadness - but just the opposite was true. Because in Jesus and His ascension, they saw the completing of His work for them. They saw man returning to His rightful place. They saw the dominion and life stolen by Satan taken back again. And they knew everything was different. In Jesus, everything was right again.

And this is the good news that we celebrate tonight. That for those of us baptized into Jesus, everything is right again.

Now, to be sure, Satan does not want you to know that or believe it. Look around, he says. You? Triumphant? No way! You’re the same sorry person you were yesterday and will be tomorrow. You’re a let-down in the Christian department. And the old evil foe who promised to open the eyes of our first parents but gave them only blindness, now seeks to blind you to the truth as well. The truth of your victory in Christ. . . . But Jesus now ascends in triumph, and promises to send His Spirit to enlighten us and open our minds to see this truth. Or as St. Paul told us tonight, He will ***“enlighten the eyes of your hearts, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.”***

So do not be deceived. It is true. And so later, when they had received the Holy Spirit, the apostles would realize that their question: ***“Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”*** was much too small a question! For Christ has restored us to no earthly kingdom, but to Paradise. And the apostles will now proclaim this message to all the world. That the prince of this world, the usurper and pretender to the throne, has been cast down, and is being cast down from the hearts and lives of people the world over. Cast down by our mighty Saviour, every

time a sinner young or old is baptized. Cast down every time we hear those wonderful words: *I forgive you all your sins*. Cast down every time we eat His body and drink His blood. That's why disciples don't stand gazing up into heaven - we gaze where our Lord has now promised to be for us - in words, and water, and bread and wine - and see Him there.

And so sin, death, and devil reign no more. Though you are attacked by them, they do not reign, and they cannot win. The liar has been silenced, the destroyer has been destroyed, and Jesus now rules all things for us. Ruling in every circumstance, no matter what is happening in your life. So that even though hardship or heartache, problems or pains, come your way - He is greater than all. And under His care, He will see you through this life to His life, which has no end. When He will come again in glory for you, and take you home, to Paradise restored.

That's why we join the disciples in rejoicing this day - not because our Saviour left, but because now risen from the dead and ascended into Heaven, our brother is enthroned! And He is ruling all things *for you*.

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