

12 May 2010
Eve of the Ascension of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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"The Conqueror Enthroned"
Text: Mark 16:14-20; 2 Kings 2:5-15; Acts 1:1-11

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

Yet tonight we also say: Alleluia! Christ is *ascended!* He is *ascended* indeed!
Alleluia!

But what does this night mean? Oh, you know the story. We heard it again tonight. Jesus is taken up from the earth, hidden by the clouds, and sits down at the right hand of God. The story of Elijah foreshadows this already in the Old Testament, complete with the sending of the Spirit, which we will remember and celebrate ten days from now on Pentecost. But what does this story mean for us? Why celebrate it? Sadly, many are not sure. Maybe you are not sure.

It wasn't always so. The ascension of our Lord was one of the biggest festivals in the early church. Bigger than Christmas. Hard to imagine *that*, isn't it? Many churches are full on Christmas; few, if any, are full for Ascension. But the early church knew this day was significant - not just for Jesus, but for them. That something wonderful was happening for them. But what was it? What could they see with such clarity that we today do not?

Well, to think about that a little bit tonight, let us consider the fact that the Ascension of our Lord is sometimes referred to as His *enthronement*. We get that picture from Mark tonight telling us that Jesus "**sat down at the right hand of God**" and also from the book of Revelation which tells us that *the Lamb is on the throne with God* (Rev 7). So what are we to make of this enthronement? Is it an ending, or a beginning?

I think often times people regard Jesus' ascension as the ending of His work here - which, coming at the end of the Easter season, lends itself to that kind of thinking. But when someone is crowned, or enthroned, it's not the ending, but really the beginning of his (or her) work, isn't it? It is the *beginning* of their reign over the kingdom. It is the start of something new, and so often a time of great celebration.

But it can also be a time of great apprehension. The closest thing we, in the United States, have to an enthronement is the inauguration of a new president. That is a new beginning . . . *but of what?* What will this president do? What will he be like

and in what direction will he take our country? Will he make things better or worse? We know what he *promised* to do, but what *will* he do?

But the enthronement of Jesus is very different than that. For Jesus we know! We know that He is a friend of sinners. We know that He is merciful and compassionate. We know that He is faithful and true. We know that He has come to serve us. We know that He is forgiving. We know that He laid down His life for us. And we know that He did not just do these things, but that this is who He is. And so who He will be. For remember those words from Revelation I spoke just a moment ago, that "*the Lamb is with God on the throne*"? Those words are significant, because it is not just God on the throne, but the Lamb - Jesus, as both God and man, is on the throne. The same Jesus who welcomed sinners and ate with them. The same Jesus who wept and was whipped, who was tired and hungry and thirsty. The same Jesus who was nailed to the cross and rose from the dead, is now on the throne. And so it is not just God is His glorious divinity on the throne, but our Saviour, our brother, our friend, who is ruling all things for us.

But even more than that, we do not just know who our enthroned Jesus is, we also know what He will do. For we know that all that He has promised, He will do. For all that He has promised, He has done. All through the Scriptures, all His promises, our Lord has done. And we know that what Jesus has done, He will continue to do. For He is faithful and dependable.

I don't know if we always appreciate that because especially here in America, we think we are the masters of our own future. Yes, we have presidents, but we can vote them out of office. We have a sense of independence and self-reliance, and think that if you just work hard enough, you can be whatever you want to be. But in the early church you didn't have that. In many places in the world today it is not like that. It is illegal to be a Christian. You have evil rulers who want nothing more than to persecute and kill Christians. It is not easy, like it is for us here, today.

And so Ascension Day is for them a time of true celebration. To celebrate the fact that the future is not uncertain, but that our kind and loving Saviour is now ruling all things for us and for our salvation. And though evil persists in this world, it did not win, cannot win, and will not win. Our Saviour is on the throne. He knows what we're going through here, for He went through it. And He knows what we need, and has promised to provide. So we need not be anxious, even in the face of our worst enemy, death. Our future is certain and secure.

The early Christians martyrs knew that, and so in the face of death defied those who put themselves on the throne as the ones having the power of life and death. The martyrs knew that while these earthly rulers could take their life, the true Lord of all, who overthrew death in His resurrection, is on the throne in heaven, and

could - and would - overthrow their death too. And so what could man, what could sin, what could death do to them? Their life and future was secure in the hands of Jesus.

And so is ours! What do you need fear with Christ enthroned in power? Jesus told His disciples not to fear demons, serpents, or poison. Notice those things will still be around - but they cannot win. And they cannot win over you either. Now, that doesn't mean we should go around grabbing snakes and drinking poison! You don't have to go looking for evil and trouble - *it will find you*. You know that. For it has. The devil assails you, the poison of sin infects you, and the trials and troubles of life are heaped upon you. But as for the disciples, so for you: they cannot win. Your life and future are secure in the hands of Jesus.

That is why we say alleluia and celebrate this night: we know we are safe in the hands of Jesus, who promised us before He ascended that He would be with us always (Matt 28:20), and then ascended to make it so. Who ascended so that He would no longer be in one place, but now in every place - with every Christian, in every church, at every font, on every altar. Washing, feeding, forgiving, and strengthening. Conquering sin, death, and the devil still. Coming to us sinners and through His cross and resurrection, making us children of God. Until, as the angels told the heavenward-gazing apostles, He will come again - visibly, one more time, in glory - to take us to be with Him forever. For where He has gone, there we know we will be too.

Until that day, as the collect of the day will say, *we ascend in heart and mind* to fix our faith and our thoughts not upon the things of this world - which cause fear and anxiety, which cause hurt and pain, which cause sin and unbelief - but to fix our hearts and minds on Christ. On Christ the conqueror. That repenting of ourselves and our hardness of heart, we receive from Him all that is good, and know that all that comes from Him is good. That is His hands we are in good hands, and will be forever.

For Christ is ascended! [He is risen ascended! Alleluia!] Alleluia.

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