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The Ascension of our Lord

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“Jesus’ Ascends to Come, Not to Leave”
Text: Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Alleluia! Christ is ascended! [*He is ascended indeed! Alleluia!*]

That sounded weird, didn’t it?

Christ is born! That we get. Christ is risen! Yes, alleluia! But *Christ is ascended*? It just doesn’t seem to be on the same level as those first two. For how many come to church on Christmas? How many on Easter? How many on Ascension? It’s not even close. It just doesn’t seem as important, does it? So why bother? Why celebrate Jesus’ *leaving*? Yes, maybe that’s it. At Christmas, Jesus comes to us. At Easter, Jesus rises from the dead and comes back to us. But at Ascension, Jesus is leaving . . . or so it seems. And why celebrate *that*?

Well, the disciples did. We heard at the end of the Gospel that after Jesus ascended, they **returned to Jerusalem with great joy**. Notice that. And notice that it wasn’t just any joy, but *great* joy. Or as the Greek literally says: *mega* joy! The kind of joy we have at Christmas and Easter . . .

So there must be something to this ascension after all. Something worth celebrating. But what is it? And why are we so confused about it?

Well, I think the confusion comes from the fact that while the ascension of Jesus seems like a leaving, **it is really another coming**. A coming like at Christmas and Easter. And if we can learn to think of it that way, we won’t be so confused about it and its meaning, we will know the disciples’ joy, and we will understand that this day is really worth celebrating.

So how is Jesus’ ascension really a coming to us?

Well, take note of how the ascension is described for us in the reading from Acts. It says there that **when [Jesus] had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight**. It is important that those words do not say that Jesus is gone - only that He is now *out of their sight*. And He is out of their sight because of a cloud. And clouds in the Bible usually aren’t rain clouds, but presence-of-God-clouds. A cloud leads the people of Israel through the wilderness. A cloud fills the tabernacle when God comes to speak with Moses. A

cloud descends upon the Mount of Transfiguration when the voice of God speaks. And now, a cloud hides Jesus from the sight of the disciples at His ascension.

Coincidence? Not a chance! Rather, Jesus is ascending into the presence of God, to the right-hand of the Father - which is not a place, but a power. For (sorry to all you left-handers out there!), but the right-hand is the doing hand, the power hand. And Jesus ascends to the right-hand of the Father to now do His power; to do His work in *all the world*. That as both God and man, He now **come** to all men in all places, in all times, and **come** with His forgiveness, with His life, and with His salvation in every pulpit, every font, every altar. For these are the places where He promised to be; where He has promised to come to us today.

Now, that can be a little confusing, because we usually think of God - and Jesus is God - as being omnipresent; or, present everywhere. So why do we need Him to come to us in pulpits, fonts, and altars? Or in other words, in His Word and Sacraments?

Well, think of it this way. Water is every everywhere. It is in the air, which we've especially felt these past few days with the high humidity - that's water in the air. Water is in the clouds. Water is underground. But all that water does us no good because we cannot drink it. To be of benefit to us, water has to come to us in a **place**, and in a **way** in which we can get it - in a well or from a faucet. Then we can drink it. Then we can wash in it. Then it gives us life. And without it, we die.

So it is with Jesus. He is indeed omnipresent as God, but so that He might come to us as the God-man, with His gifts, He ascends, so that He might now come to all people, of all times and places, in ways that we can receive Him. And so it is through preaching and the Sacraments that Jesus now gushes out and where you can now see Him, hear Him, and touch Him. Where you can drink deeply of His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Where you receive His life.

That's also why when Jesus ascends, He commissions His disciples to go and do these things - to preach and give the Sacraments. Their mouths and hands would be the faucets through which Jesus now **comes** to us. In America, in Europe, in Africa, in Australia, in the Middle East, in Asia, in any and every place, all at the same time! Thus fulfilling His promise to be with us always (Mt 28:20) - not like the water in the air, but as the water we drink. The living water that gives us everlasting life!

That is the first way that Jesus ascends in order to come to us.

The second is that Jesus ascends in order that the Holy Spirit now be sent and also **come** to us. That would happen ten days after His ascension, at Pentecost. As if Jesus coming to us with His gifts weren't enough, He also sends to us His Spirit to

be with us always. But this is not really two separate comings, but one and the same coming. For where Jesus is, there is the Spirit; and where the Spirit is, there is Jesus. It's not as if we can receive Jesus apart from the Spirit, or the Spirit apart from Jesus - the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. And Jesus never only gives you part of Himself, but always ALL of Himself. In His Christmas coming, His Easter coming, and now His Ascension coming, Jesus gives you all He is and all He has. That you may be His own. That He may sanctify you and keep you until He comes again for you - either when you die, or when He comes again in glory.

And so this really is a day of great joy - *mega* joy! For this, too, is a day of Jesus' coming. Which I think Luke wants us to understand in his own unique way. For in describing Jesus' ascension, he writes that **[Jesus] led [the disciples] as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them**. And then He ascends. But it never says He put His hands down. He never finishes blessing. His hands are extended the whole time . . . and they still are. For now ascended, Jesus is still extending His hands and still blessing, still giving, still feeding, still washing, still forgiving. And He isn't going to stop. He isn't done. Which is good, because you still need Him.

And so for you He ascends, so that for you He may come. Even now. With forgiveness for your sin, with strength for your weakness, with faith for your fear, with life for your death. No matter who you are or where you are. Even now He comes with His grace, until He comes on the last day in His glory.

So do not be confused, and do not be deceived. Just as the angels brought the good news of Jesus' birth, and the angels announced the good news of Jesus' resurrection, so too the angels proclaim the joyous news of Jesus' ascension. So rejoice with the disciples, with *mega* joy this day. Sing the great hymns of the ascension. And cry out with joy: Alleluia! Christ is ascended! *[He is ascended indeed! Alleluia!]*

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.