

8 May 2013
Eve of the Ascension of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

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“Great Joy!”

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

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

Forty days. That’s how long Jesus appeared to His disciples after His resurrection. And they needed every one of them. The horror and grief of those three days, when Jesus was crucified and sealed in the tomb left a mark in their heads and in their hearts. And then to see Him resurrected! It is not so easy to believe. And so Jesus comes to them. He appears to not only the twelve, but also to James, His brother, to Paul, and to more than 500 brothers at one time (1 Cor 15:5-8). And they not only see Him and hear His voice, they touch His body and watch Him eat with them. This is no ghost. Jesus is with them. He is risen, just as He said. These are the eye witnesses - over 514 of them! - and they would give their eye witness testimony to the truth of the resurrection. And as any attorney would tell you, if you have 514 eye witnesses testifying to the truth of something, you pretty much have a slam dunk case.

But now the forty days are up, and it is time for Jesus to ascend to the right hand of His Father. Forty days: the same number of days it rained on Noah’s ark. Forty days: the same number of days Moses spent on Mt. Sinai. Forty days: the same number of days Jesus fasted in the wilderness being tempted by satan. Forty days: God’s number of days. So Jesus is taken up from them. A cloud hides Him from their sight. They will not see Him again until He returns in glory.

They lingered a moment, though. They stood there, staring up into the sky, taking it all in. Two men in white robes - *angels* - ask them why. We’re not told what their answer was - or maybe we were. For Luke tells us that ***they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.***

They were not sad that Jesus had left. They were filled with ***great joy***. Do you remember the *only* other time Luke used that phrase “great joy?” He speaks of joy many times, but of ***great joy*** only one other time - when the angel told the shepherds that Jesus was born. When Jesus came down from heaven in His incarnation. *Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people* (Luke 2:10). Now Luke uses it again, for now those words have been fulfilled. Now there is ***great joy*** for all people. For Jesus’ victory is for all people.

Jesus has triumphed over sin, death, and hell for all people. Jesus has paved the way to heaven for all people. *For you*. So how could the twelve not be filled with great joy?

And so that we may understand and have this great joy too, we sang a moment ago of what Jesus has done for us in His ascension: *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).

Or in other words, Jesus came down from His throne as the Son of God, but now He returns as both God *and man*. It is not only His divinity that ascends but also our humanity. And with that, the honor and dominion of man, forfeited by Adam, has been restored by Jesus. Man is back where he belongs. With God. No longer divided from God by sin and death. For now sin is forgiven and death is defeated. And as Jesus ascended, so will we ascend. We will not be reincarnated to another life on earth, as some would have us believe. No, as Jesus is risen from the dead and ascends into heaven, so will we. In Him. *By our mighty Lord's ascension We by faith behold our own*.

And so filled with that great joy, the disciples ***are continually in the temple blessing God***. No private, mumbled prayers are these! They are proclaiming for all to hear. That there is forgiveness in Jesus. That there is hope in Jesus. That we have a Saviour in Jesus. And when the Holy Spirit came upon them on that first New Testament Pentecost, ten days later, this was the message they carried into all the world, ***to the end of the earth***. The message that has now come to us. The message that now gives us *great joy*.

Which we need. For how often does the toil, tribulation, and tumult of this world rob us of our joy? This world that seems to be coming apart at the seams, that seems to be plunging deeper and deeper into sin. And the sin that we can't seem to shake, that keeps erupting out of us no matter how we try to stop it. *Where is our Lord's great joy for us?*

It is still in our Lord's ascension. That's what Paul explains to the Ephesians; the words we heard earlier. Seated at the right hand of the Father, Jesus is ***far above all rule and authority and power and dominion***. Our Jesus is in control. The rulers of this world may think they are, but our Lord has been setting up and taking down rulers and kingdoms, powers and dominions, longer than any of us have been alive. And all for the sake of His Church. For ***all things are under Jesus' feet*** for the sake of His Bride. And you can be sure Jesus is still taking care of His Bride, His Church, you, that the Gospel may be proclaimed ***to the ends of the earth*** and ***to the end of the earth***. From our limited point of view it may not always seem like it, but we

believe it. We confess it. Just as Jesus' cross did not seem good at the time, but evil, yet turned out to be the greatest good of all, so it is with the crosses we must bear in our day. *For while a cloud hid Jesus from the disciples' sight, it has not hid us from His sight.*

In fact, Jesus' ascension means that He is more present with us now than He was before. Jesus is not ruling from some far away and unknown place named heaven, but is the one who now as both God and man **fills all in all**. He is no longer present only in Zacchaeus' house, or at the table of Simon, or in the home of Mary and Martha, but now is present in fonts, pulpits, and altars all over the world. Speaking to us, washing us, feeding us, and forgiving us. The disciples go out to the ends of the earth not only to speak Jesus but to bring Jesus, to give Jesus. To bring that message of great joy that is for all people: that God is here *for you*.

Yet even here and with us still, so too has Jesus gone to prepare a place for you, and will come back to take you to be there too (John 14:2-3). For He did, in fact, **restore the kingdom to Israel** - not the old, earthly Israel, and her old earthly kingdom, but the new Israel, the Church, and a heavenly kingdom. *When* that day will come when Jesus returns, all flesh is raised, and we will be taken - body and soul - to that kingdom, **is not for us to know**. But to know that He *will* is enough.

So today is a day of great joy. The disciples had it right. And so *A Hymn of Glory We will Sing* (LSB #493), to our risen Christ, ascended Lord. For we are now the ones in white robes, baptismal robes, waiting for Him to come again.

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

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