

9 May 2018
Eve of the Ascension of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“Restoring the Kingdom?”

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

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

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

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Throughout His ministry, in His parables, in His teaching, Jesus had spoken a great deal about the kingdom of God. But as the disciples looked around, there was no kingdom in sight. And now He was leaving. So, *now* Jesus? Will you now, at this time, restore the kingdom to Israel?

It is not wrong to ask such a question. Some think it is. That it is wrong to ask about a kingdom; that that is worldly thinking. But Jesus is the King, He is being enthroned, and He does have a kingdom. So such a question is okay.

And Jesus doesn't say no, that there is no kingdom. His response is simply one of timing. That *it is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority*. So it seems that yes, there will indeed be a kingdom.

But here's the thing - it's in the other half of their question. *Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?* That's what many of the people of that time were waiting for. For Israel to be freed from the control of the Romans. For the restoration of the Promised Land. For a son of David to again sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem.

But that is the old way of thinking. The Old *Testament* way of thinking. But Jesus, through His death and resurrection, has made all things *new* (Revelation 21:5). So as we heard in the Gospel from Luke, Jesus has to open the minds of the disciples to understand; that *everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled*. That all the old must be *filled up* by Him, so that the new come to pass. So there is a new Promised Land, His Promised Land. There is a new Israel, His Church. There is a new throne of David, His throne. And there is a new kind of kingdom, His kingdom. Jesus is not restoring things to the way they were, but completing the old and establishing something new.

And so there will also be a new way of restoring the kingdom of God. Not with earthly power, but ***with power from on high***. The power of the Holy Spirit. Wait for Him, Jesus tells them. I am ascending to send Him to you. And when I send Him, ***you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth***. Or in other words, they will give eye witness testimony to Jesus' death and resurrection. And as they do, the kingdom of God will be restored. But not to Israel. Not to a nation or land of Israel, to a piece of ground with borders and a name. Yes, it will be established, He says, in ***Jerusalem***, and it will be restored in ***Judea***. But it will also grow in ***Samaria***, and it will, in fact, spread ***to the ends of the earth***. For wherever the Word is proclaimed, there will be the kingdom of God. There will be faith. There will be the Church.

Wherever His Word is preached, that Jesus died for your sins, that He paid the price, that He is your substitute on the cross . . . Wherever people are baptized into His name, dying to sin and rising to a new life . . . Wherever there is absolution of sins, guilty consciences set free and given peace . . . Wherever His Body and Blood are given us to eat and to drink, giving life and salvation . . . Wherever these things are, there Jesus is restoring broken sinners and establishing His kingdom. He promised.

And Jesus is the one doing it. Even though He is ascending, and is ascended, He is the one doing it. Luke tipped us off to this when he wrote: ***In the first book, O Theophilus*** [the Gospel of Luke], ***I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up*** . . . But now in this second book [the book of Acts], he will speak of what Jesus *continues* to do. Now, through His Word. Through His apostles. The ones He is now sending out to speak in His stead and by His command. So that when you hear them, you hear Him (Luke 10:16). And the kingdom of God will grow.

And as Jesus said, it will grow at times and in places you do not expect. It is not for you to know that, exactly. It will surprise you. Jesus will surprise you. How His Word works, and when, and in whom. But this we know: that the kingdom of God will be established and grow, and the gates of hell will not overcome it (Matthew 16:18). Though sometimes it may seem like it. But just as death could not defeat Jesus, and the grave could not hold Jesus, and as we celebrate tonight, this world cannot contain Jesus, so too His kingdom. It will grow and spread, rising and growing even though persecuted; even after being given up for dead.

So this kingdom Jesus is restoring is a hidden one now. Hidden in weakness and poverty, hidden under persecution and oppression. Hidden in the hospital room and the nursing home, hidden in the ghetto and refugee camps. Hidden in poor, miserable sinners who screw up and make mistakes - sometimes whoppers. We, like the disciples, look around and ask: *Where is this kingdom?* For there seems to be no kingdom in sight.

But in the same way as Jesus ascended and was hidden by the clouds, but will on the Last

Day come again in glory for all to see, so too on the Last Day will the kingdom of God be seen. On that day what is now hidden will be revealed. The glorious reality that has been here all along will finally be seen. And we just might be surprised at what we see . . .

But that is not yet. Now, is the time not of sight but of faith. Of believing the words and promises of Jesus, what He says about His kingdom, His power, and His glory. And so Paul's prayer for the Ephesians was that they would see now, by faith, what was hidden to their eyes. That *having the eyes of their hearts enlightened* - that's what the Holy Spirit does, He enlightens us - that they (we!) *may know (1.) the hope to which he has called you, (2.) what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and (3.) what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe.* That we know this, believe this, and live this. A reality hidden, but nonetheless very, very real.

And you know, that will look foolish to many. To those who have no faith, who believe only what their eyes see. But the kingdom is being restored and established. Though ascended, Jesus has not left us. He is working for the good of His Church and the good of His flock. For your good. That you believe, that you have the same joy as the disciples, and that you have an eternal inheritance with Him in His kingdom. One day we'll see that. But for now, we *stay in the city* - not a physical city, but a new one: the city of God. For here He sends us the Spirit, here He speaks to us His Word, here He washes us, here He feeds us, here He absolves us, here He strengthens us and keeps us. He promised.

And thus fed, supplied, and cared for, we proclaim to the world, like Luke and the disciples, all that Jesus began to do and is still doing for us. We proclaim His victory in our words and in our lives, in our love and in our forgiveness. We proclaim that **Christ is ascended!** [He is ascended indeed! Alleluia!] And that He is still working, and restoring the kingdom, for you and for all.

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