

12 May 2021
Eve of the Ascension of Our Lord

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“On the Offensive”

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.

The Ascension of our Lord takes place 40 days after Easter, as we heard in the reading from Acts tonight. 40 is a significant biblical number. It is also a number that frames Jesus' salvific, incarnate work for us.

For when Jesus began His public ministry, He was baptized by John in the Jordan, and after the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit **descended** upon Him in the form of a dove, He immediately was thrown out into the wilderness for . . . yup, 40 days. And as you know, He was thrown out there to be tempted by the devil. But Jesus was not on the **defensive** out there in the wilderness, trying His best to survive this onslaught of the old, evil foe. The reality was exactly the opposite. Jesus was invading enemy territory. He was going out into the place created by sin - a place of nothingness and death - to go on the **offensive** against the one who brought sin and death into a perfect world. The Son of God, with the Holy Spirit, goes out to fight. **And win.**

Now, 40 days after His great victory, His great resurrection from the dead, the heavens open yet again and Jesus **ascends** to the right hand of the Father. Not a physical location, but the place of His authority and power. He is the Father's right-hand man. And as He does, as He ascends, He promises His disciples that same Holy Spirit that had descended upon Him. Not because they will now be on the defense because Jesus is gone - but quite the opposite! To go on the offensive yet again against the devil. To go out into all the world with the Gospel - the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins; the Gospel of the resurrection victory over death; the Gospel of Jesus' triumph over hell and all its powers; the Gospel that the one who overcame by the tree in the Garden of Eden has been overcome by the tree of the cross. Now, with Jesus' ascension, the battle, the fight goes on - now Jesus fighting and working through His Church. And again, **He will win.**

For a *wrong* understanding of the Ascension is that Jesus is now gone and we are alone. He *was* here, on earth, but now He is *there*, in heaven. And now the big, bad, satanic wolf is out there, lurking, prowling, beneath every rock, around every corner, waiting to pounce . . . and so we are on the defensive. Until Jesus comes again, we're in survival

mode, just trying to hang on and get through this world and life until Jesus rescues us! Either taking us out of this world in death, or coming again in glory. But either way, hang on! It's going to get rough and tough. That's how satan *wants* you to think. How weak you are! How vulnerable you are! What danger you are in!

And without the Holy Spirit, it would be so. That would be true. But Jesus promised His disciples *I will not leave you as orphans* (John 14:18). We're not abandoned street children just trying to survive. Rather, Jesus says, ***I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. [S]tay in the city until you are clothed with [this] power from on high.*** Did you hear that? This power. We are not powerless. Jesus ascends *in order to* send the Holy Spirit. *The Spirit*, as Isaiah tells us, *of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord* (Isaiah 11:2). And when Jesus does, *when the Holy Spirit has come upon you*, Jesus says, ***you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*** That is, the disciples - now apostles, sent ones - *will go on the offensive!* They will go out into all the earth with the power of the Word and Spirit of God. And so, Luke tells us, ***they returned to Jerusalem*** not in sadness that their friend, Master, and Saviour had left them, but ***with great joy*** that Jesus' powerful work of forgiveness and life would now continue through them.

And it did. Beginning the very day the Holy Spirit descended upon them and 3,000 people were baptized! That's the church on the offensive, people saved and rescued from the dominion of satan and brought into the kingdom of God. And the church has been continuing that work ever since.

Though sometimes it seems like we're on the defensive, doesn't it? The power of the world seems so great and the church and Word of God seem so weak. And ignored. So we cower in fear. We hunker down in survival mode. We don't believe that the power of the Word and Spirit of God is greater than any and every power on this earth. And of that we need to repent.

Because no matter how things seem to us, the world and the evil one are not winning. **Period.** Jesus already won the victory over sin, death, and hell. **Period.** Maybe that power is hidden now, as it was when Jesus looked just like a poor carpenter from Nazareth, when He looked like just another condemned criminal on a cross. And maybe the church looks similarly poor and condemned today. Do not be deceived or misled into false belief and despair! Hear Jesus' words of forgiveness and life, know that the tomb is empty, and that the victory has been won. Sin couldn't defeat Jesus, death couldn't hold Jesus, and hell couldn't stand against Jesus - and it still can't. That, too, Jesus promised, that *the gates of hell cannot prevail* against the church that confesses Him as Saviour (Matthew 16:18).

That's why the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy that day of Jesus'

ascension, and why this is a day of great joy for us. For while we still live under the cross, we do not live in defeat. The cross is the hidden glory of God, the unlikely but oh so powerful instrument of God's great victory for us. And where the cross is today for us - in the water of baptism, in the proclamation of forgiveness, in the preaching of the Gospel, and here again tonight in the Body and Blood of Jesus - is that same power and victory.

So after being baptized and receiving the Spirit, Jesus goes on the offensive in the wilderness. And after being baptized and receiving the Spirit, so does the church today. On the offensive every time a person is baptized and made a child of God. On the offensive every time we forgive and do not take revenge. On the offensive when we proclaim the grace and favor of God that is gift and not earned. On the offensive when we confess the victory of Jesus here in His Supper. On the offensive against the sin and darkness in the world. We have a light to shine that scatters the darkness and gives hope. A light that shatters even the darkness of the grave and points us to an eternal home.

So like the disciples, return to your home tonight with great joy and be continually blessing God.

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

And His Spirit and victory and power are yours.

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.