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Eve of the Ascension of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Kingdom Is Restored”

Text: 2 Kings 2:5-15; Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

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.

When Elijah was taken up to heaven by God, a double portion of his spirit was given to Elisha, that he might carry on the work of Elijah and speak the Word of the Lord to the people of Israel.

That event is a foreshadowing of Jesus' *even greater* ascension. Elijah was taken, but Jesus ascends of His own accord. To Elisha a double portion of Elijah's spirit is given, but ten days after He ascends, Jesus pours out the *fullness* of His Spirit upon His twelve apostles - and with this Spirit, Jesus would carry on His work through the apostles, who would proclaim the Word of the Lord, not just to the people of Israel, but to the whole world.

But the disciples do not yet understand all this. Though Jesus has been teaching about this, repeatedly, the truth has not yet sunk in. That's why they ask, **“Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”** They are still thinking in terms of an earthly kingdom and a worldly Messiah. They do not yet realize that Jesus has, in fact, already restored the kingdom through His death and resurrection, and the apostles were now going to spread that kingdom throughout the world.

But this is not a problem unique to the apostles - truthfully, we have this problem too. We think of the church, God's kingdom of grace on earth, in worldly terms, looking for her to have worldly success, worldly beauty, worldly power, worldly wealth. And when she doesn't, when she looks weak and poor and small and plain, we think something is wrong; we think there must be something more. And that this “something more” is what will attract people and make the church bigger. Weak and poor and small and plain can't be the way it is, could it?

Well, if you want to know what the kingdom is like, think of the King whose kingdom it is. He was born not to royalty, but in peasantry, in a barn. He chose ordinary working-class guys as His disciples. He looked no different than everyone else. He hung out with the outcasts and common folk. And He was crucified as a

criminal, even having to be laid in a borrowed grave. And even after His resurrection, He didn't "show-off" to the masses - He only showed Himself alive to His own, His followers, who believed in Him. His kingdom was not of this world, and He would not make it of this world. Satan tempted Him in that way, remember? *All the kingdoms of the world and their glory I will give to you*, he said (Matt 4:8). Jesus was not interested. There was only one kingdom He was concerned about - the everlasting one. The one built not by the things of this world, but by the Spirit.

And so before He was crucified, He told His disciples, *I am going to prepare a place for you* (John 14:2-3). And today we remember that He is doing just that. But that is only half the story. For Jesus' ascension also means the coming of the Spirit, that just as Jesus goes to prepare a place for us, so the Spirit comes to prepare us for that place. And not just us, but all whom God will call to Himself through the preaching of the Word and the work of the Spirit.

And that's exactly what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer, when we pray *Thy kingdom come*. In the catechism we ask: *what does this mean?* (Which is what the disciples needed to learn!) And the answer is that *God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity*.

Or in other words, the kingdom of God is coming when those apostles go out and preach the Word. The kingdom of God is built when the Spirit works in the hearts of those who hear and brings them into the church. The kingdom of God grows as people are baptized and absolved and fed by our Lord's Supper. For in all those ways, Jesus' death and resurrection is working - working in us the forgiveness of our sins, the death of the old man, and the raising of the new man.

And that means the kingdom of God cannot be seen, for the Spirit cannot be seen. We can see evidence of Him, just as we see the wind blowing the trees but cannot see the wind - so also the glory and majesty of the kingdom of God is now hidden. Hidden under weak and poor and small and plain people and churches. But make no mistake about it - though that be the appearance, the reality is much different. For there is nothing so powerful as the weak-looking Word of God. There is nothing so rich as those who look poor but have the Spirit and kingdom of God. There is nothing so large as those few on earth who belong to the company of angels and archangels and all those in heaven who have gone before us. And there is nothing so majestic than us plain and ordinary-looking sinners who repent of our sins and receive the forgiveness and life of our Lord.

Jesus' ascension means that. It means that the kingdom of God *has been* restored - ***it is finished!*** And so He ascends to the Father - not to leave us, but to send His

Spirit to continue his work, to continue building the kingdom. And that is what's happening. You may not be able to see it; but faith knows it's true.

Jesus told His disciples to ***stay in Jerusalem until they are clothed with power from on high*** - until they are sent the Holy Spirit. They are not to go and wait just anywhere, but where Jesus has told them and the place He promised where this would happen. And that is what we do as well. We wait for His coming where He has promised Himself and His gifts for us - in His Word and Sacraments. There is where we are clothed with power from on high - with the power of Jesus' forgiveness, life, and love. Those things don't have any worldly power, worldly majesty, or worldly wealth, yet are the most precious things in the world. When you have them, you have everything.

So on this day when we celebrate Jesus' ascension, we come and receive His Supper, for here the kingdom of God has come to us. Here is the King in His body and blood. Here is His life and forgiveness. Here He is preparing us for the place He has gone to prepare *for* us. And so like the disciples, we leave this place and ***return with great joy***, for what is there not to be joyous about? Our Saviour is risen triumphant from the grave and has given us His kingdom. And we know that one day, we too will ascend and be with Him where He is.

So tonight we rejoice and are glad! *Up through endless ranks of angels* (LSB #491) our Saviour has gone and now reigns forever as our king! For Christ is ascended! [He is ascended indeed! Alleluia!] Alleluia!

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