

17 May 2023  
Eve of the Ascension of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Promises, Promises!”

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

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

***You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.***

Those were the last words of Jesus recorded by Luke in the book of Acts. Things were going to be different now. Oh, they already were, to be sure. Jesus' death and resurrection had changed everything. But even more now, with His ascension. There would be no more appearances to them, no more times of teaching and instruction, no more eating together. Jesus is returning to the right hand of the Father - His place from eternity as true God, but now also His place for eternity as true man. His work of atonement is complete. Sin is forgiven, death is defeated, hell is overthrown.

And these disciples are now no longer disciples. They are no longer followers, learners, listeners. They are now apostles, sent ones. Ones sent to speak what they have heard with their own ears and seen with their own eyes these past three years. They would witness, testify, to the truth of all Jesus said and did - most especially and by far most importantly His death and resurrection. Yes, He really did die dead. Yes, He really was sealed in the tomb. And yes, He really was alive after that in His same body - with the nail holes in His hands and feet, and the spear gash in His side. He rose from the dead, just as He said. All was accomplished, just as it had been laid out in God's Word.

So now they would go. Not on their own. That would never do! But with the Holy Spirit. The Helper, the Spirit of truth that Jesus had promised them. And they would go not in their own power. That would never do! But in the power of the Holy Spirit given to them. And they would witness, testify, speak, ***in Jerusalem***, where they would speak the truth to power; ***in Judea***, where they would speak the truth to their fellow Jews; and ***in Samaria***, where they would speak the truth to those not Jews - those once outside, but now brought inside by Jesus, who has sheep in His flock from every nation, tribe, people, race, and language. And this they would do ***to the end of the earth***.

Now usually, when we hear *that* phrase, ***to the end of the earth***, we think of *geography* - which makes sense in this context. They would testify in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the whole earth. And that fits with the Great Commission, the last words of Jesus to His disciples recorded by Matthew, to baptize *all nations* (Matthew 28:19-20). But usually,

in that case, the phrase used is *to the ends* - plural - *of the earth*. Like, to the four winds, the four points of the compass, all the farthest reaches of the earth. It *could* mean this, but in the Greek, there is a different word usually used for that meaning. So maybe it means something else . . .

And that something else is that maybe instead of geography, we should think of *time*. This testimony of the disciples, now apostles, would continue until *the end of the earth*, until the end of time, until Jesus comes again in glory. That also fits the context, for Jesus also tells them that *it is not for [them] to know times or seasons when He would restore the kingdom*, and the message of the angels who spoke of Jesus coming back *in the same way as you saw him go into heaven*.

Now, you could argue that the apostles died and so couldn't testify until the end of time. But you could also then argue in the same way that they didn't really go to all the ends of the earth. **But their testimony did**. Their testimony, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, *was both oral and then written*. And that written eye-witness and ear-witness testimony, which we now call the New Testament, *has* gone to the ends of the earth. And that testimony continues - and will continue - until the end of the earth, the end of time. Which is a promise, not a command. Usually, when we hear those words "*you will*" we think command - you will do this, you will do that. It's on us. **But it can also be a promise**. This *will* happen. This *will* be the case. And in that case, it's on God. It's still His work. That, as Luke said, *all that Jesus began to do and teach*, He will now continue through the testimony of the apostles.

Which is why we also heard tonight that after Jesus ascended the apostles *weren't* sad - rather, *they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God*. Because that's what the promises of God do - they give us joy. The promises of God are what we can count on in a world where it seems that more and more, there is very little we can count on. Things keep changing. We never know the next disaster, shooting, crime, destruction, riot, or pandemic that is just around the corner. Others let us down. We let others down, and even let ourselves down. And without the promises of God . . . what do we, what *would* we have to look forward to?

But that's why Ascension Day is such a joyous day! **It is a day of promise**. Jesus returns to His throne to rule all things for the good of His people, for the good of His Church. He promised. He promised that while not all things that happen would be good, all things *would* work together for our good (Romans 8:28). And He can do that. We have the promise that the apostles' testimony will continue until the Last Day, which means that *the Church* will continue until the Last Day - she will not perish or go away. A promise Jesus had made before as well (cf. Matthew 16:18). And we have the promise that Jesus is coming back again for His Bride, the Church. That unlike a world that is constantly changing and with little we can count on, we have the firm foundation of the promises of God. His

words and promises that do not change and that we can count on. His promise that our sins are forgiven. His promise that we are His children through baptism. His promise to feed us with His Body and Blood. And His promise that we not only have all this now, but that there is a great and glorious future waiting for us when He fulfills His promise to return.

So when we say *Alleluia! Christ is ascended! [He is ascended indeed! Alleluia!]* it is with that confidence, the confidence of His promises. Promises that give us certainty. Promises that give us life. Promises that give us joy. For we know that the ascension is not an ending, but a beginning. ***That all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up***, is now continuing. And with Jesus risen and reigning on the throne, ***far above all rule and authority and power and dominion***, and above every name that is named, ***not only in this age but also in the one to come***, will never end.

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