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Eve of the Ascension of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Our Hope In Life For Life”

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

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 is both one of the most important - and most forgotten - days in the life of the church. It is the completion of the resurrection. Jesus rose from the dead not to stay here in this earthly life filled with sin, sorrow, and sadness, but to return to the Father and to His kingdom, which He is preparing for us. Jesus ascends into heaven not for Himself, but for us, that we, too, ascend. He lives that we live. He rises that we rise. He ascends that we ascend. It is all for you. To give you *hope*. The hope that we need

I don't think I need to tell you that. But I did, just in case. Because I think we can lay many of the world's problems today on an absence of hope. My life is hopeless or my situation is hopeless so I am going to end my life. This pain I feel - whether it is of the body, of the mind, or of the spirit - is too much for me. I have no hope of it getting better, so I will turn to drugs. And from drugs often grows addiction, and from addiction, crime, and then poverty, homelessness, and death. There is no hope for my spouse, for my marriage, for our problems, so I will end it; get a divorce.

And what else? Where else is hopelessness felt in our world today? Felt maybe even by you? And what happens then? Hopelessness drives us into the arms of false gods. This will be the answer to my problems. The desire to have more. The desire to fit in. The desire to be someone. And when these things I have put my hope in don't work, or don't work for long, my hopelessness increases, driving me either farther into the arms of false gods, or to despair that there is any hope for me at all, in this hard, cruel, sinful world.

Our age, our generation, is not the first to be so afflicted. In Paul's prayer for the Ephesian Christians, we heard his desire *that [they] may know what is the hope to which [the Father] has called [them], what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places*. That is, the answer to our hopelessness is not only Jesus' resurrection, but also *His ascension*. That Jesus, our brother, who took on our human nature, lived as we do, and knows all that we

are going through - all the temptations and problems and struggles - this Jesus, our Jesus, is now ***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. And [the Father] put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.***

If that is true - and it is! - then *nothing is hopeless*. No life, no situation, is beyond hope or help. Because Jesus is on the throne. Jesus is ruling all things for the good of His Christians and His Church.

Now that is an article of faith, right? Because if you look around at the world and look at your life, it may not seem like it! It may not seem like Jesus is ruling all things for your good! Or if He is, He's not doing a very good job of it. We'd certainly do things differently! But isn't that what Adam and Eve thought? And did? Their differently didn't turn out so good. Peter didn't want Jesus to go to the cross! That differently certainly wouldn't have worked out so good. In fact, all through the Bible, every time someone thinks God isn't doing it right and that different would be better, and does that different . . . it doesn't turn out so good. From Moses to David to Judas to . . . us. So maybe the problem isn't Jesus. Maybe we need our hearts to be enlightened to see things in a new way. That God doesn't need to do things differently. We do.

I think we get a glimpse of this with the account of Jesus' ascension. When you read the account of Jesus' ascension in Matthew, it says that when they gathered together that day in Galilee, *they worshiped Him, but some doubted* (Matthew 28:17). But then we heard today from Luke that after Jesus ascended, ***they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.*** You would think that Jesus leaving them would cause sadness, not joy, and certainly not great joy - or *mega* joy, which is how the Greek puts it. But it did. They were joy-full, not hope-less. *Because* Jesus was now on the throne.

Which doesn't, of course, means the disciples had an easy life! You know they didn't. They were arrested, beaten, and most of them martyred. But they were never hope-less. Because no matter what happened to them here and now, they had a future that was secure, they had a life that could not end. They knew that just as Jesus had risen, so would they. Just as Jesus has ascended, so would they. Just as Jesus reigns, so would they. Therefore suffering and martyrdom was not a horrible end to be avoided at all costs, but now more like a stubbed toe on the road to eternal life. Painful! But insignificant compared to the glory waiting for them.

And waiting for you! For you have that same promise of glory. In Baptism your hearts were enlightened, or illumined, by the Holy Spirit, to know your Saviour and the hope He brings. You are catechized; your minds, too, opened, like the disciples, to know all that He has done for you, how He has fulfilled all the Scriptures. When you stumble and fall

into sin you are lifted up in His absolution. And you are given a seat here at His Table, to be fed by Him. For you have not a God far away someplace in the heavens, who may or may not see you or know what you are going through or care, but a God who is here. At hand. His hand reaching out to you, to baptize, absolve, and feed. To fill you with Himself, His life, and His hope.

Luke told his beloved Theophilus that his first book, his Gospel, *dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach*. That is, that all he said in his Gospel was just the beginning. Jesus isn't done. He is ascended, but He isn't done. He is ascended, but He isn't gone. He is ascended and ruling all things for you; for your good. That even though you sin, that even though others sin against you, that even though you struggle, you never be hopeless. Because none of those things can win. For all of those things were overcome by Jesus in His death, resurrection, *and ascension*. And though they afflict you now, you, too, will overcome them. In Jesus. That though they seem like great calamities now . . . and I don't want to belittle what you are going through. But whatever you are going through now - even if it be martyrdom, like the disciples - it is in reality but stubbed toes on your way to the life and glory Jesus has prepared for you.

That is the lesson I think the disciples learned, that turned their doubting into joy. And it is the lesson we must all learn - and constantly re-learn! - as well. All our lives. That the devil's strength is a mere show, while the seeming weakness of Jesus' cross is our true strength, and our victory. Jesus resurrection and ascension show that. So there is our hope. All hope. Our hope is not in success, not in wealth, not in ease, not in happiness, not in anything else in this world and life or what it may offer us. All of that can - and will - only fail us and drive us in the end to despair. But in Jesus, we have hope. And with that hope, joy. And it will not disappoint.

So *the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy*. And we return to *our* usual lives with great joy. They did, and we do, for one reason only - because *Christ is ascended!* [**He is ascended indeed!**] And through stubbed toes and all, and even a martyrdom or two, we know the victory is ours.

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