

28 May 2025
Eve of the Ascension of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Christ Isn’t Gone! Christ Is Ascended!”
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.

When one thing ends, something else begins.

High School ends, and either College, Trade School, or a job begins.
Singleness ends and married life begins.
When working ends, retirement begins.
Childhood ends and adulting begins.
Renting ends and home ownership begins.

At such times there is usually a mixture of fear and anticipation. Fear of an unknown and uncertain future, and anticipation of beginning a new phase of life. These are critical times, times of transition, sociologists tell us. Times which brings challenges, but also joys. Times it is especially important that Jesus go with us; that we not go it alone.

And so it is today, with the Ascension of Our Lord. Jesus’ *bodily* ministry on earth is ending. What began with His conception, when the Son of God came down from heaven and was made man, is now ending as that body - born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, that was crucified, died, and was buried, descended into hell, and on the third day rose again from the dead - as that same body is now taken up to the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

So now a new time, a new facet of Jesus’ ministry begins. He is not done. In His Gospel, Luke tells us that he ***dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.*** Now, in the book of Acts, he will deal with all that Jesus continues to do - and still *bodily* - just in a new way. There will be a new *bodily* ministry of Jesus, through the Apostles, that is, through the Church, which is the **body** of Christ. So Jesus is not leaving in His ascension - just continuing His work in a new way.

And so for the Eleven (soon to be twelve again, with the appointment of Matthias),

their time of discipleship, their time of learning, is coming to an end, and their time of apostleship, their time of witnessing, is now beginning. And they go not alone. Jesus is going to send the Holy Spirit to be with them, to teach them, remind them, strengthen them, and lead and guide them. And through the Spirit, Jesus will continue His saving work in the world, that what began with His incarnation continue and not cease, until Jesus comes again in glory. Or as the angels told the eleven as they stood gazing into heaven as Jesus ascended: ***until Jesus comes back in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.***

Now, the apostles will have their share of challenges and fears with this transition, as they begin their God-given work of being the eye- and ear- witnesses of all that Jesus said and did. But on this day, they are filled with joy, as we often are when we graduate, or retire, or get married. They ***returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.***

And they were - not because things were going to be easy for them. Quite the contrary! The level of opposition and persecution was going to ramp up and get intense. Most of them would be martyred. But when Jesus ascended, they knew that those hands now raised in blessing, those hands once nailed to the cross and laid lifeless in the tomb, those hands *that still had holes in them*, **are now controlling the universe.** As we sang, *man with God is on the throne* (LSB #494 v. 5) at the right hand of the Father. That's not just the Son of God there - that's *Jesus* there. God and man, your brother, your Saviour, ruling all things for your good. Continuing His work *in* the Church, *through* the Church, *for* the Church, and for the life of the world.

So Jesus isn't gone. Jesus isn't *up there* somewhere. He didn't ascend to leave us, but to be with us in a new and greater way. To fill all things and every font, pulpit, and altar with His presence. To start this new and final chapter of His work for us and for our salvation.

And these eleven were an important part of that. Jesus had told them before, *He who hears you, hears me* (Luke 10:16). So now, as Jesus continues His *bodily* work through His *Body*, the Church, they will be His voice and His hands. When they preach, He is preaching. When they baptize, He is baptizing. When they absolve, He is absolving. When they celebrate His Supper, He is the one providing His Body and Blood to us to eat and to drink.

This is why the Church can never be a virtual Church, an online Church. Jesus' work is *bodily*. He isn't gone. He isn't just here spiritually. Jesus is here in body and in Spirit, in body and blood, for our bodies and spirit, for our body and blood. That our times of transition and change also be times of joy. That when we are baptized, one life ends and a new life begins. And when we die, when one life, our bodily life on

earth, ends, a new and eternal - and bodily! - life will begin. Which we know and can be sure of, not just because of Jesus' resurrection, but also because of His ascension. Because He rose bodily, we will rise bodily; and because He ascended bodily, we will ascend bodily.

And, by the way, that time of change and transition, *through death to life*, is usually a time of both anticipation and fear. Death is fearful. It isn't natural. We were never meant to die. It is unknown and uncertain for us. But at the same time, knowing that Jesus has passed through death to life again, and that He has promised to bring with Him all who are joined to Him in faith, makes it a time of joy and anticipation as well. For when a Christian dies, he or she dies not alone. Jesus goes with us.

As He does tonight when we leave this place, when I lift up my hands in blessing, just as Jesus did that day. My hands, Jesus' blessing, as God's Name is put on you, and where God's Name is, there is He. Strong to bless and to save.

But what that looks like in your life, what you need to bless and to save, what challenges you will face and what joy you will have, well, I would say not two of you will be the same. For no two of you are the same. But each and every one of you, your Saviour knows. And loves. No sparrow falls to the ground without Him knowing it. And the hairs of your head are all numbered. So whatever you will face or are now facing, Jesus is with you.

And yes, ***restoring the kingdom to Israel!*** The disciples asked Jesus about that, right before He ascended. And Jesus didn't deny it - He said that ***it was not for them to know the times or seasons*** - or I might add, the ways and means, the challenges and joys, by which Jesus would do that. They were to go by faith. As do we.

But to go by faith doesn't mean we go with a weak and uncertain hope! It means we go with confidence and a sure and certain hope. That what Jesus has said, He will do. And what He will do, will be for our good. And so we can face the changes and chances of life in good courage, knowing that we are not alone, and that Jesus is on the throne. From womb to tomb, from death to life, from cross to the right hand of the Father - Jesus is for you. And what He has begun, He will bring to its fulfillment. His ascension is the proof.

So we do not stand here, ***gazing up into heaven*** for our Lord to return. We know that He will. So we go out to where He has put us, to the people He has given us, as Jesus continues His bodily work through our bodily work for others. And when He comes again, bodily, our joy will be complete, as we transition one last and final time, from this life to the next, to that life that has no end.

So until that day, we'll do as the disciples did . . . *as His Body*, the Church. ***They worshiped him***, meaning they received His gifts and blessing. ***They returned to Jerusalem with great joy***, so we return to our homes with great joy. And ***they were continually in the temple blessing God***, thanking Him and proclaiming all that He has done, and is still doing. For Christ isn't gone! **Christ is ascended!** [He is ascended indeed! Alleluia!] And as Paul said, He 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. [With] all things under his feet . . .***

To rule for you, for us, and for all. Triumphant forever. Therefore to Him be all glory, honor, and worship, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. AMEN