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The Ascension of Our Lord (observed)

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Next Level Christ, Next Level Christians”
Text: Luke 24:44-53; Ephesians 1:15-23; 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.

When Jesus was in Jerusalem, He was not in Galilee. When He was talking to the Samaritan woman at the well, He was not preaching to the folks in Nazareth. When Jesus fed the 5,000 in Galilee, He was not healing in Judea. When He was asleep in the boat while His disciples were battling a stormy sea, Jesus was not in the Garden of Gethsemane. Duh, Pastor! A person can only be in one place at a time.

But what if He could? What if Jesus could be preaching here and in other churches at the same time? Feeding here and in the Dominican Republic? Baptizing here and in Ethiopia? Forgiving you here as well as a poor, lost sinner in India? That would be something, wouldn't it? And not by cloning Jesus, so there would be lots of Jesuses everywhere. But the one and only Jesus, God's only-begotten Son, here, there, and everywhere, all at the same time. That would be *next level*. Something greater than God's glory filling the Tabernacle and Temple. Greater than Jesus eating and hanging out with tax collectors and sinners. The same Jesus, but more.

Well that's exactly what we're celebrating this day. This is exactly what the ascension of Jesus has done. Taken Jesus *to the next level*.

For Jesus' ascension is not a spatial thing. That's usually how we think of the Ascension. We're *down here* and Jesus is now *up there*, in heaven, a place far, far away, looking down on us. We think of Jesus' ascension like letting go a balloon filled with helium and watching it go up and disappear from our sight. It used to be here. Now it's not. It's gone. He's gone. And we think that way because of our creaturely limitations. That must be how it is because that's how it is with us. If I ascend to the fifth floor of my hotel, I am no longer on the first floor. Duh.

But that's not what the ascension of Jesus is, or means. For while Jesus *once* humbled Himself, *limited* Himself in that way, living with us as one of us, going through everything we go through - hunger, thirst, betrayal, persecution, death - *His*

resurrection changed that. No longer humbled but now glorified, no longer limited but now exalted, having passed through death to life again, things are different now. Next level.

And we see this already the night of Jesus' resurrection. The disciples are gathered together in a room with all the doors and windows locked, and Jesus appears to them. He doesn't pick the lock on the door or climb in through the window, He just appears to them. Just as the Romans made the tomb as secure as they could but couldn't keep Jesus *in*, so the disciples made that room as secure as they could but couldn't keep Jesus *out*. He is with them. And not just as a spirit, but flesh and blood Jesus, with a body they could touch. And while we're not told how Jesus left . . . maybe it was the same way He appeared. He just did. Just disappeared from their sight. That's what happened to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, after all. Once Jesus opened their eyes and they realized it was Jesus who was with them and teaching them, we are told *he vanished from their sight* (Luke 24:31).

For after the resurrection, it is no longer about Jesus coming and going, but Jesus appearing and then disappearing. From time to time assuring the disciples that He's there, that's He's with them, that's He's not gone. Things are just different now. Greater. *Next level.*

And now with His ascension, it's not that Jesus is leaving. In fact, in Matthew's account of Jesus' ascension, Jesus says exactly that! He tells His disciples: *Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age* (Matthew 28:20). So He's not leaving. It's just that from now on, they will not see Him anymore. *No more appearances.*

Which it seems the disciples understood. That though now unseen, Jesus was not gone. If we go back to the balloon example for a moment . . . you know what I've never seen? A child *happy* when their balloon flies away! No, they're sad! They're crying! It's gone. *Mom, get me another! I'll be more careful next time.* But the disciples *were* happy. We heard today that when Jesus ascended, when He disappeared from their sight, the disciples **worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.** They knew this was a good thing; good news. That wherever they were, wherever they went, in prison, in Jerusalem, or in Rome, the resurrected Jesus was with them. That Jesus wasn't gone, but actually, quite the opposite! He was now with them as never before. Next level Jesus. Triumphant, glorified, exalted Jesus.

And with that, the disciples are changed. They don't cower in fear anymore. They confess Jesus before the authorities. They rejoice when they are beaten. Life wasn't easy for them. Not at all! But with Jesus' ascension, they, too, were changed. They, too, became next level. Not supermen - they still sinned; they still messed up. But they began living as if they, too, had won. As if they, too, had gone from death to life.

Because they had. What Jesus did, He did for them. What Jesus did, He gave to them. Forgiveness for their sins, faith for their fears, life for their death.

And these gifts they would now go and give to the world. And Jesus promised them that what they did, He would be doing. And what they gave, He would be giving. Just as He had been working before, so Jesus would be working now, only now through them, through His Church. *He* would no longer be seen, but *they* would. His Church would.

And so through them, Jesus would be preaching in *every* pulpit that faithfully proclaims His Word. And baptizing at *every* font that baptizes according to His command. And forgiving with *every* Absolution of His spoken. And feeding with His Body and Blood at *every* altar rightly confessing this reality. No longer in one place only, but in all places where His Word and Sacraments are; where his gifts are given; where He has promised to be. That what changed the disciples change us, too. That their confidence be our confidence.

Confidence even though we cannot see. Even though what we see seems like the world going to hell in a hand basket. And a Church that isn't far behind. A Church wracked by scandal, shattered into a countless number of denominations, and in many places compromising with a sinful world for the porridge of popularity. And we see this . . . and it seems that Jesus *really is* far, far away in heaven and not here, not helping them and not helping me. Not helping me when I really, really need Him here with me. In my troubles, in my sickness, in my broken marriage, in my feuding family, in my sadness and sin. Hard to be confident when that's what we see! When *that's* what's happening to us.

But the thing to remember is that when Jesus *was* here and seen, things didn't look much better! He was opposed and persecuted, looked despised and weak, was surrounded by undesirables, scorned by the elite, and finally crucified as a common criminal. His disciples fought with one another, wanted places of greatness, and fell asleep on the job. Some kept trying to drag Jesus into politics and to side with one of the many political factions of that day . . . But there were hints, too . . . signs, that something better was coming. Sinners were forgiven, the sick were healed, lepers were cleansed, demons and unclean spirits were cast out, the dead were raised . . .

So things weren't as they appeared. And now, living on *this* side of the resurrection, they still aren't! One day we will see Jesus again, and everything set right. The angels said that to the disciples - that Jesus would ***come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.*** One day we'll see that! And see Him as He is. But not yet. Now is the time of faith, not sight. But there are hints that we can see. Signs. The Church is still here. Sinners are still being forgiven and baptized. The Word is still being

proclaimed. Jesus' Body and Blood are still being given to bodies and souls thirsting and hungering for righteousness. And you are here. Because Jesus is here, and has brought you here. To be next level Christians. Courageous, confident, and faithful in the midst of a sinful and sin-filled world.

Which is what all Christians really are. It's really the only kind there is, even if you don't seem like it or feel like it. Jesus' tomb is still empty, and so yours will be, too. Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, which is not a space or a physical place - that He's there and so not here - but a position, an authority. And Jesus, your brother, a man just like you, though also true God, is using that authority for you. Always for you. For your good. For your life. For your salvation. Which might mean suffering or hardship now. But an *eternity* of life and joy might be worth a *moment* of hardship or suffering now, don't you think? So suffering or hardship doesn't mean you're somehow less of a Christian! Rather, it just might mean you bringing Jesus into a difficult situation, to a difficult person, to bring truth, clarity, forgiveness, love where it is needed most. That what Jesus did, and would now do through His apostles, and now is doing through His next level Christians. The ascended Jesus who is not gone, but *next level*. To **fill all in all**.

So just as after Jesus' ascension, ***the disciples worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God***, so do we.

We have come here and worshiped Him. That is, we have come and received his gifts, for that is the highest worship of God - to receive the gifts He wants to give you, His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

And now we return to our homes with great joy - not because our homes are places of great joy, because maybe you have chores to do, or struggles and difficulties and challenges. We return with great joy because we are taking the joy of Jesus home with us. That there be joy in joyless places, love in loveless places, and hope in hopeless places. That instead of sin and death, there be forgiveness and life. That's next level!

And we are continually *in the world* blessing God. In our workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, proclaiming the goodness of God, and living it. Bringing Jesus to a world in need.

That'll never be easy. But it will always be good. And if you don't think you can do it, *you're right! You can't!* But Jesus can. Next level Jesus. Jesus in you. So come and receive Him now, again. His Body and Blood, His forgiveness and life, His salvation and strength. And then go back out to a dying world as next level Christians, filled

with Christ. Don't *stand here looking up*, as the disciples did! Up is not where Jesus is! He is here. He is in you. And He goes with you. To give life to a dying world.

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

In order to be with you always.

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.