

Sermon for The Ascension of our Lord

Date: June 2, 2019

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Acts 1:1-11

Epistle Reading: Ephesians 1:15-23

Gospel Reading: Luke 24:44-53

Sermon Text: Acts 1:1-11

Sermon Title: Ascension like a Funeral?



Introit: Psalm 110:1, 4–5; antiphon: Psalm 47:5

Hymns:

LSB 491 – Up Through Endless Ranks of Angels (v.1,2,4)

LSB 537 – Beautiful Savior

LSB 529 – Since Our Great High Priest, Christ Jesus (v.1,4)

LSB 493 – A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing

Distribution:

LSB 489 – Hail Thee, Festival Day (*Ascension verses 1,2*)

Liturgy:

Divine Service I, p. 151



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Text: Acts 1:1-11

In my first book, Theophilus {*th-ee-AW-full-us*}, I wrote about what Jesus began to do and teach. This included everything from the beginning of his life until the day he was taken to heaven. Before he was taken to heaven he gave instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles, whom he had chosen.

After his death Jesus showed the apostles many convincing evidences that he was alive. For 40 days he appeared to them and talked with them about God's kingdom.

Once, while he was meeting with them he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for what the Father had promised. Jesus said to them, "I have told you what the Father promises: John baptized with water but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

So when the apostles came together they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Jesus told them, "You don't need to know about times or seasons that the Father has determined by his own authority. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes to you. Then you will be my witnesses to testify about me in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After he had said this he was taken to heaven. A cloud hid him so that they could no longer see him.

They were staring into the sky as he departed. Suddenly, two men in white clothes stood near them. They asked, "Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking at the sky? Jesus, who was taken from you to heaven, will come back in the same way that you saw him go to heaven."

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Grace to you and peace in the name of our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we celebrate Ascension. An event that occurred 40 days after Jesus' resurrection. When Jesus died there was no time for a funeral. The approaching Sabbath Day forced them to bury Him quickly. The law concerning the Sabbath Day forced them to wait. Jesus had died late Friday afternoon. They had to get home and prepare for Sabbath, which was all day Saturday. Then on Sunday morning, as you know, Jesus had risen from the dead. The women who went to the tomb were the first to see Him alive.

Over the last 40 days Jesus has been showing Himself to hundreds of people. They all gave glory to God because Jesus had defeated the Temple Authority. He had defeated even Death and the Grave. Nothing can keep Him down. The One who was promised to Adam and Eve, the One who was promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and so many many others now had come.

Everyone forgot that there had been no funeral. No one thought that He would ever leave again. He had defeated Death. How could anything keep Him down? What reason could there be for Him to ever leave? They still, however, did not fully understand why He came. You might think after all they had seen, and all He had done, they would finally understand, but they didn't. We know that because in our Bible reading today we read these words, "Lord, is this the time when you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

They wanted to be free from Rome. They wanted to be free from the corrupt Temple Authority. They wanted to be free to live their lives and have peace, and Jesus was the person they believed could give that to them. They were ready. They just wanted to know when He was going to get started.

Here is the irony in their request. He had already given them freedom. He had given them a freedom so profound that they still didn't fully grasp it. Jesus had freed us from sin. He had freed us from eternity in Hell. He had given us eternal life with Him. His kingdom has been established and it will last forever. Yet, they asked, "Is it time for You to get started?"

Jesus told them not to worry about time. He said power and understanding would come to them soon. They should just patiently wait. Then He blessed them. Perhaps He used the Arronic blessing.¹ That same blessing I give to you at the end of each worship service. The blessing God gave to Moses and Arron to bless the

1 Numbers 6:24-26

people nearly 4000 years ago. After He blessed them He began to rise. He rose up into the sky and the people all watched until He disappeared behind a cloud.

Then they noticed two angels standing there. They told the people to do what Jesus said. Go back to the city and wait. He is not gone forever. He will return, the same way you saw Him leave.

Now He was really gone. The last time they could not mourn Him because the laws of the Sabbath forbid it. This time, however, they have the time and opportunity to process the fact that Jesus is gone.

So are they sad? They are not. Scripture records that they went back to Jerusalem rejoicing,² because they knew Jesus did not lie to them. He said He would come back from the grave, and He did. Now He told them that He would return. They knew He would. So they gave glory and praise to Heaven, and they waited.

A return does not always happen as fast as we might like it to. Some may recall an event that occurred on March 11, 1942. It was on that day General Douglas MacArthur was ordered to leave the Philippines. As he left he said a famous, but short little speech. "I shall return." It took over two years, but the event of him walking up onto that island was recorded by several cameras. It was a huge news story. MacArthur had kept his word.

For the younger generation among us there is another character who often makes the claim that he will return. How often have you heard Arnold Schwarzenegger say, "I'll be back" in his thick Austrian accent. He says it in almost every movie, and he always does.

These are human promises, and sometimes human promises are broken even when they are made with the most sincere heart. Many of you may remember Harry Houdini. He was a magician and escape artist who performed back in the 1920's. His act was to promise he could escape anything. He could return from anywhere. Nothing could keep him locked up. Nearing his death he told his wife, "If there is a way, I'll come back. I'll contact you some how. Watch for me on the anniversary of my death."

In 1926, on October 31 he died. As you might guess Harry Houdini did not come back to us. He could not escape this trap. His promise was broken. Sadly Houdini will never return. He was not a Christian. He did not have that saving faith given by God and he is lost to us forever.

Jesus has also said, “I will return.” That was a promise made by the Lord our God. It is more dependable than MacArthur. It is far more real than all of Schwarzenegger’s characters in movies. It is far more reliable than Houdini. This is the Word of God. It is dependable and reliable. It is the truth. We know Jesus will return, but it will take some time. How much time? God only knows, and He has told us not to be troubled about when, so we wait.

We can trust that Jesus is a man of His word. He always has been. When He walked this Earth He often said He would have to die, but then added, that on the third day He would come back to life. He made that promise and He kept it. On that first Easter morning Jesus rose victoriously. He was the conquering general who had won the war. Death and Grave had been defeated. Christ walked victoriously through the city for over a month. A parade of victory, if you will, to show the whole world He had won. He kept His word.

We can have faith that He will always keep His Word. He will return. We know that because God does not lie. What He says is true because He has said it. Jesus is coming back some day, and on that day there will be only two sides. One side is victory and celebration. The Bible sometimes calls it the great wedding feast of the Lamb. It will be full of wonder beyond compare. What a glorious day that will be.

There is, however, another side that will not be celebrating. They will see Jesus’ return and fall to their knees in dread and fear. For them Judgment Day will be a day of regret that never ends. For them, their rejection of God’s Word, God’s promises, and God’s love will be a mark against them that will never be removed.

Which side will you be on? That is perhaps the most important question we can ask on this Ascension Sunday. Which side will you be on? I presume you all want to be on the first side. You want to go to the feast. You want to be part of the great celebration. You want the joy, the peace, the victory! If that is what you want, how do you get it?

Will it be all the good that you have done that will get you in the door? You faithfully come to church every Sunday, and you help the people around you as much as you are able. Surely God will let you in because you are a good person. I would suggest to you, that if you believe that you are in trouble. The Bible tells us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.³ Not one of us will ever see the wonder of that day if we think we can rely on our own good efforts and good life.

Scripture states, “Believe and be baptized and you will be saved.”⁴ It also says, “Those who do not believe are already condemned.”⁵ Scripture says the road and the gate to Heaven are narrow.⁶ Sadly far too few people will walk that narrow road and enter through that wondrous gate. That should bring concern to our hearts, and a desire to do something to change it. What can we do?

That is part of what next week is all about. It is about knowing that Jesus did leave, but He did not leave us alone. Next week we will explore and celebrate the moment in time when the Old Testament ended, and the New Testament began. That is the day we call Pentecost. It is the birthday of the Christian Church. On that day the Holy Spirit came to Earth, and now does not just dwell with us, He dwells within us. He lives in our hearts. Our bodies have become a temple for the Holy Spirit.⁷

The good news we have to offer is that salvation has been won. It is for all people. God wants every single person on Earth to be saved.⁸ The gift of salvation is a free gift. You don’t have to earn it, or buy it. It is, like any gift, given freely. That gift is freedom. The freedom that Jesus won for us.

Amen.

4 Mark 16:16

5 John 3:18

6 Matthew 7:13-14

7 1 Corinthians 6:19

8 1 Timothy 2:3-4