

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/16/2010, Ascension Sunday
Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53

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

Let me begin this Ascension sermon by referring to a most tender scene from that first Easter morning. I mean the moment when Mary Magdalene hears that voice she had so loved to hear before, but which all experience led her to believe she would never hear again this side of eternity. But on that magnificent Easter morning, she does hear that voice again, for the resurrected Jesus speaks her name:

Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. (John 20:16, KJV)

You can almost picture Mary's inclination to rush to her Savior. She turns herself toward him. She speaks her title for him, "Rabboni." But Jesus urges her to withhold herself from him. Jesus bids her to hold him not. He speaks of his Ascension:

Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet *ascended* to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. (John 20:17, KJV)

Who could blame Mary Magdalene on that first Easter morn? She had heard again the voice of her Savior. The affection of her heart longed to spring her limbs into action so that she would rush to him, but he would not be held. He would not be delayed. He must ascend to the Father, for he has his proper ministry to accomplish it.

Aye, and judging by the Bible, his proper ministry is twofold. He ascends meaning to do two kinds of things. Both are for your sake and for mine. First, he ascends to devote himself to prayer for us. He moves close to the Father and to the Holy Spirit and he intercedes for us with them. And second, he ascends in order to prepare a place for us. Let's take these two in turn.

First, Jesus ascends to plead on our behalf. He ascends to conduct his high priestly ministry of intercession.

This world of ours can be tough. Some folks are living right on the edge of things. If they are pressed another ounce, they are going to fall into poverty or into a physical or mental breakdown. In this fallen world, some folks are burdened too much, close to the breaking point, close to despair.

This past week I attended a clergy meeting led by a seminarian. He was near the end of his internship year. We all have affection for him. He chose to do a

Bible study on a strange topic. Well, I guess it was a young person's topic. He wanted to offer a Christological interpretation of the most recent Batman movie, *Dark Knight*. He showed us scenes from the movie and discussed them. One of the scenes that I found especially moving finds Batman dangling the Joker upside down high in the air. If Batman lets go of his rope, the Joker will plunge to his death. But the Joker does not seem alarmed. Instead, he boasts of how he has been manipulating and breaking down the city's mayor, driving the poor man toward despair. The Joker's striking line went something like this:

Madness is like gravity. Sometimes, it only takes a little push.

One of the seasoned clergy pointed out to the seminarian that over the course of a long ministry, a pastor is likely to encounter people who are vulnerable like that. They are close to despair, nearly bereft of self-confidence, on the edge of madness. Then the pastor has to pray that he not succumb to fatigue or impatience or hardness of heart and end up being one more burden in an already overburdened life.

Well, clergy sometimes fail. But there is one Pastor who never fails to intercede for the poor sinner. Jesus has ascended to heaven in order to keep his eye on you and to pray for you. This world can be tough, and it is good to know that our Great High Priest remembers us in his prayers.

As long as my mother lived, she always signed her letters to me the same way: "With love and prayers, Mom." I have passed this tradition on to our boys, so that I always sign my notes, "With love and prayers, Dad." It always comforted me to know that my mother was praying for me. I especially valued the prayers of my mother and father because they seemed to be such good people. Even more so is our resurrected Jesus a good person. And he is a person of prayer for you, for me.

Sometimes we go to a brother or sister in the Lord and we ask them, "Would you remember me in your prayers?" It is a natural thing to do and a right thing. We can pray for ourselves, but we would awfully glad if others prayed for us too.

Let me mention that it is a high responsibility if someone asks you to pray for them. Try hard not to forget the request for prayer. Sometimes I here the voice of someone on the sidewalk saying, "Father, pray for me." I have trained myself to stop, to ask the person's first name and prayer request, then to take his hand and to pray right then and there. I do not want to nod that I will pray, but then forget, so I try to do it immediately. I pray that God will forgive me for the times when I have forgotten or hastened on by.

But Jesus does not forget or hasten on by. He has ascended to the right hand of the Father to pray for you and for me. It is a ministry he began it on the Cross. He beheld the people crucifying him and prayed, "Father, forgive." He continues it to this very day. He points to the wounds in his hands, his feet, his side and intercedes for us, "Father, forgive."

So, that is the first of our Lord's Ascension ministries. We refer to it each Sunday in the liturgy for the Holy Communion. The pastor prays:

Join our prayers with those of your servants of every time and every place, and unite them with the *ceaseless petitions of our great high priest* until he comes as victorious Lord of all.

And we all sing in Trinitarian response, casting ourselves into the arms of Christ, trusting in his intercessions for us:

Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father, now and forever. Amen

Now, let us turn to the second of our Lord's Ascension ministries: He goes to prepare a place for us. I am rejoicing now in one of the most famous passage in St. John's Gospel. Jesus is speaking. Jesus is comforting his disciples. They are troubled because Jesus has said that he is going away. So, Jesus comforts them by pointing out that his going away is for their benefit:

²In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. (John 14:2-3, KJV)

And so it is that the life between Christ and the believer is a mutual preparing for one another. He ascends to heaven to prepare a place for us. And our life on this earth is to be a preparing of ourselves for our homecoming to him, to the Father, and to the Holy Spirit.

This matter of preparing ourselves to one day meet the ascended Lord who prepares a place for us is part of the reason I have given up on my old dream of a pilgrimage to see Jesus. I used to imagine that if Jesus had not ascended, but had stayed here on earth, maybe in a cottage somewhere in the Middle East, I would be glad to make a pilgrimage there. I'd be glad to stand in line and wait my turn to talk with our Lord.

Only, it would be an awfully *long* line, since there are so very many people here on earth, and I bet I would be near the *end* of the line, since "the first shall be last and the last first," and I've had more than my fair share of blessings.

But the main problem with the idea of a pilgrimage to the cottage of Jesus is that while waiting in line, I'd be neglecting a lot of good work that this same Jesus is calling me too, and so when I finally did reach him, I fear I would disappoint him simply by my idleness. I've concluded, then, that a pilgrimage to see Jesus is a losing proposition. Christ did not die for us that we should linger in some line.

I am trying to get at the dignity and nobility of Christian life. Jesus does not ascend to the Father in such a way as to leave us with nothing to do until he returns. It is not that he dashes off to tend to his ministry, but leaves us with no work.

We can see that in the Ascension story itself.

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and *you will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:6-8, NRSV)

And so it is that Jesus commissions his disciples. He assigns to them a task. He is off to heaven for his ministry, but he assigns ministry to his followers in the meanwhile. We are to be his witnesses on earth. We are to live and to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love. We are to so speak and live for Christ that no corner of this earth is bereft of him for his witnesses are there.

It would not do, then, for me to live out my years standing in line to see Jesus. He did not give his body and blood for the purpose that I should stand in line to see him. Rather, he gave his body and his blood for me that, as Luther puts it in the Creed:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death, *in order that* I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true. (*Small Catechism*, Second Article of the Creed, my emphasis)

That is how we are to occupy these years granted to us: We are “live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” There are an awful lot of hurting people in this world. There is plenty of need for us to prepare ourselves for our homecoming to heaven by striving to be “little Christs” in this world, as Luther puts it.

So, that is our part, to prepare for Christ by serving him here below. As for the part of Jesus, that is wonderful to imagine. Modern translations tend to replace the *King James Version* of our Lord’s promise with a more neutral word. That is, where the *King James Version* speaks of “mansions,” modern versions speaking of dwelling places. In the old version, Jesus says that...

²In my Father’s house are many mansions (John 14:2, KJV)

Modern versions simply say many “rooms,” or “dwelling places.”

I like the old version better. It just makes sense to me that where our beautiful Savior is, there will be beauty for his people, and the word “mansions” suits that better.

Consider those who grieve. The Holy Spirit has laid a dear saint to rest. It is a great thing then to believe that Jesus has ascended to the Father and to the Holy Spirit, has interposed his own scars between us and our judgment, has interceded for us with his own body and blood, and has prepared a place for that dear saint.

Christ is the Good Shepherd who leads his people into heaven, and he has gone there to make it possible for us to follow. That is why we celebrate the Ascension of Our Lord Jesus.

Meanwhile, we are not bereft of our Lord. We have Pentecost and we have the Sacraments. Next Sunday, we celebrate Pentecost. We celebrate the truth that the resurrected Jesus is willing to set up a home in our heart if we will permit him. He has not withdrawn his Spirit from earth. If we will, he will abide in us and we should abide in him. Not only this, not only do we have Pentecost, but also we have the Blessed Sacrament to which we now turn. In that Sacrament, Jesus brings heaven itself into this church. He brings his very body and blood to us. For now, we hear his voice: This is my body, this is my blood. But one day, vision will be added to hearing and we then be home with our Lord Jesus, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.