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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/13/2015, Ascension Eve
Luke 24:44-53
Joyful Labor

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵⁰Then [Jesus] led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. ⁵¹While he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven. (Luke 24:44-52, RSV)

My sermon subject this evening is “joyful labor.” Jesus has ascended into heaven – that is what we celebrate this evening. But he has not ascended into heaven to be idle there. Rather, he has ascended into heaven so that he can intercede for us and for our poor earth. No winds push against him there, no clouds overshadow him, no fatigue weighs him down, no opponents cross him and kill him. He gets to labor on joyfully and without hindrance, with the goal that is dear to his heart: you and me and our world, that we might be saved.

ST. PAUL

Let me briefly shift away from our ascended Savior Jesus to St. Paul. In the evening of his life, St. Paul wrote a famous passage to his beloved disciple Timothy. It goes this way:

⁷I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: ⁸Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:7-8, KJV)

“I have fought a good fight,” says the apostle. “... I have kept the faith.” Happy is any gray-haired saint who with an honest heart can say such a thing. Blessed is the deathbed of the Christian who can look back over his life, her life, and perhaps with a dying breath say, “I have kept the faith.”

I am sure that St. Paul was conscious of his sins and his failings. We know that he grieved over his former persecution of the church. His regret for that stage in his life probably haunted him to the end, judging by his testimony in First Corinthians:

For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Corinthians 15:9, RSV)

And, in any case, St. Paul, of all people, knew that we are not saved by our merits or good deeds, nor even by the fact that we have fought a good fight and kept the faith. We are saved by Jesus Christ, and to him alone be the glory.

Still, it makes a big difference in a human life whether we have *tried* to be true to Jesus, tried to fight a good fight, tried to keep the faith amidst the myriad details of our individual lives. St. Paul seems to have been such a one: once he came to Jesus, he tried to be true to our Lord for the remainder of his days.

So, in the autumn of his life, St. Paul is off to heaven to wear “a crown of righteousness” that Jesus shall give him. I am happy for Paul that he is able to give such a good testimony to Timothy, and I am happy to think of Paul in heaven wearing his crown of righteousness.

But this is Ascension Eve, and I want to shift the tone a bit when it comes to the idea of being off to heaven. Forgive me. I mean no disrespect. But the idea of sitting around through all eternity wearing a crown of righteousness seems so very mild to me, so very passive. I am persuaded that there is more to the Ascension of Jesus than wearing a crown throughout eternity. I suggest that the Ascension of our Lord is more like the renewing of the battle. It is more like being refreshed for labor that matters to you. It is more like being cast back into the good fight, only this time with renewed strength and with the confidence that nothing is going to stop you this time – not even death!

CEASELESS PETITIONS

In our Sunday liturgy, week by week, I gladly read aloud a prayer that speaks of the “ceaseless petitions of our great high priest.” It is part of the Great Thanksgiving in the Holy Communion. It is a beautiful prayer that transcends all the fussing and fighting and divisions that trouble us in the church. It brushes aside all those divisions in the Body of Christ and unites us with the whole Communion of Saints across the world and through the ages. It unites us all with our ascended Lord Jesus. The prayer goes this way:

- ☐ 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.

What I am after is that we will notice the energy in this description of our ascended Lord. It is a prayer that speaks of ceaseless work. It speaks of our own Saviour, Jesus, praying for us continually – deeply concerned for what is going on in our lives, both as a congregation and as individual believers, and interceding for

us with the Father. He stands in the middle, between God the Father and us, interposing his own body and blood and his precious wounds between us and what might very well have been our destruction. Jesus over watches and tends to us carefully, ceaselessly, and joyfully. His Ascension does not leave him idle, but gladly laboring on behalf of us and our world.

WEARY IN OUR LABOR

In an autobiographic section of one of his sermons, the Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon makes a distinction between being tired *of* labor versus being tired *in* labor. The old preacher sounds exhausted, which I can well believe, considering the massive amount of work he did. The passage goes this way:

My soul is in haste to be gone; I am not wearied of the labor,
I am wearied in it. To toil thus in the sun, though for a good
Master, is not the thing that just now I desire.¹

If we are able to say a similar thing about our work – that though we become tired *in* our work, we do not become tired *of* it – then I think we have been blessed with a good vocation. Not all people can say that. For some people, their labors are unsatisfying. They get up Monday morning and head down into the mines – into the dark and into the dust. Or they head off to the factory and do the same repetitive deeds all day long. Or they put on their uniforms, grab their whistles, and stand all morning in the heat, in the fumes, amidst the traffic, directing impatient cars and trucks this way and that. Or they load and unload furniture all day, except that they are getting older and the arthritis is hurting them and their muscles aren't as strong as they used to be. Monday through Friday, or maybe even Saturday, they work. And Monday mornings always speed toward them, always seem to be at hand. They are both tired in their work and of their work.

But our ascended Jesus never grows weary either in or of his work. If you gave him a sabbatical, he would not take it. If you gave him a vacation or even a day off, he would decline. This labor is no burden to him. It is what is on his heart continually. And truth be told, there is no rest for Jesus unless he is at work. His work both rests him and invigorates him. His work satisfies the deepest reaches of his soul, for you are there. In the deepest parts of our Lord's soul, you are on his mind and on his heart continually, and he prays for you.

¹ “Heavenly Rest,” delivered on Sabbath Morning, May 24, 1857, by the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens.

“There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.”—Hebrews 4:9.

Is there some burden on you that no one else knows of? Jesus knows it. He is not away on vacation. He knows your burden and he prays for you.

Is there some fear haunting you? Is there some disappointment weighing you down? Is there some sin, some regret, some bad memory that depresses you? Jesus knows all about it. He is not idle, but is praying for you. He is our Great Intercessor. And his prayers are worth a lot! Indeed, they are worth everything. They are worth salvation itself.

To our Great Intercessor be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.