

Pastor Caleb Douglas
Immanuel Lutheran Church
The Ascension of Our Lord, May 30, 2019
Luke 24:44–53

In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The question that I want to occupy our time together this evening is a rather simple one, but perhaps one that is not often asked, and perhaps one that you have not thought much about before. What does it matter that Jesus ascended? Every time that we confess the Apostles or the Nicene Creed, we confess the central events in the life of Christ. We confess that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and Mary, and for this confession we have twelve days set apart every year to think especially and almost exclusively about this. We confess that Jesus suffered, died, was buried, descended into hell and rose again. For this confession we have the central week of the Christian year—Holy Week, and then we continue to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord for the next seven weeks. We confess that Jesus Christ is coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead, to judge us and the world in righteousness, and for this confession we have the four weeks of Advent.

But between Christ's resurrection and his coming again, we have the confession that Jesus ascended into heaven. For this confession we have but one day, which we are now on the eve of that day. All of these other festivals we have thought about together, we have remembered together and celebrated together, and you probably understand why they are the central events in Christ's life. But, why do we confess his ascension every week? There are other parts of Christ's life that are important, matters of life and death for each and every one of us, or rather, matters of *eternal* life and eternal death for each and every one of us. Jesus was circumcised, placing him at the heart of the people of Israel, and initiating his life of complete law obedience and law fulfillment. But this is not confessed in the Creed. Jesus was baptized, not for his sins but for ours, so that the Spirit of God might descend upon him and become accustomed to indwelling a human being, so that we might also receive Christ's Spirit. This also is not in the Creed. Jesus walked on water, and he healed the sick and cast out demons. As important as these are, as central as these are for us to understand Christ's

mission to save you and me from the power of sin, death and the devil, none of them have made it into the confession that defines our faith.

So, why is the ascension of Christ a central marker for our faith? What is the importance of Christ's Ascension? Another way of asking the same question is, why was it *necessary* for Christ to ascend to the Father's right hand for you and for me to be saved? The Word became flesh and lived a perfectly obedient life. But there was more that needed to be done for our salvation. He also needed to suffer and die for us. Jesus suffered and died, he was crucified, but that still was not enough for our salvation to be complete. He also had to be raised from the dead. But even Christ's resurrection was not the end of his story. He also had to ascend to the Father's right hand. So why is the ascension of our Lord necessary for our salvation?

The first thing that we need to know is that the ascension of Jesus Christ is not merely the end of a story. When in our Gospel reading Jesus took his disciples out to Bethany and they watch as he is carried up into heaven, it is not as if Jesus is simply making a grand exit, putting a sort of exclamation point on his life well-lived. He is not simply ending with a flourish, giving us something dramatic by which to remember him. Something far better than that is happening, something far more important. In the ascension, we learn and we see that when the Word of God took on human flesh, it was forever, for all of eternity. Jesus did not leave his humanity behind him on earth. What took place in the womb of the Virgin Mary has forever changed the relationship between God and his creation, and it will never be undone, will never be reversed. In the Incarnation we see that God became a human, became one of us. In the Ascension we see that God *remains* a human. The Word of God did not become flesh just for a time. He ascended in the same humanity that he was born in, the same humanity that you and I share.

So we see that the Word of God's assumption of human flesh was not merely a means to an end. Christ's human flesh was not simply a tool, to be used but then discarded and disposed of once its use was expended. His human flesh was not a costume, put on for a great drama and then taken off once the act was over. In the ascension of Christ, we see that Jesus will forever and always be our Brother, a human. He came to save his human creatures, and never will he throw away or discard his brothers and sisters that he came to save. The Word of God did not put on a costume, but put on true human flesh. The Word of God ascended in this same human flesh, so that humanity might ascend with

him, so that humanity might put on immortality and eternal life, again, not as a costume, but in truth. And because of that we can take great comfort. Just as Jesus did not disregard his humanity, God will not disregard his human creatures. Jesus Christ did not discard, or throw away his humanity once he suffered and died. The incarnation of our Lord was not merely a drop of time in the ocean of eternity, for the Son of Man—our Brother according to the flesh—is enthroned in Heaven. One of us is now one of the Trinity. And God will never repent of this. As one Scottish pastor put, the dust of earth now sits on the throne of heaven.¹

But it must be remembered, that the Ascension cannot be separated from the whole life of Christ that preceded it. It was not enough that the Word of God take on human flesh and then immediately ascend up to heaven. The one who ascended into heaven is the same one who was crucified. Jesus lived his entire life as an offering of love to his Father, offering up to the Father what you and I did not and could not because of sin. His crucifixion was the climax of this self-offering. Christ's ascension to the Father's right hand means that the Crucified One now sits in the glory of the Father; Christ's ascension means that the perfect and complete self-offering of Jesus Christ for you and for me is ever and always before the face of the Father, for all time and for every place. When the God of all creation looks upon his eternal Son, he sees one who looks like you and me. When the Father looks upon his Son, he cannot but see the scars of Christ's offering of himself in obedience for our salvation.

One of the best hymns in our hymnal is by Charles Wesley, it is an Advent hymn, but could be sung anytime in the church year. It looks forward to the day when Christ will return to reign. The first verse is:

Lo! He Comes with clouds descending,
once for favored sinners slain;
thousand thousand saints attending
Swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia, Alleluia, Christ the Lord returns to reign.²

¹ I need to get the citation for this.

² Charles Wesley, "Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending," in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), #27.

In this first verse, Christ is returning to reign, and all of the saints surround him, singing and glorying in his final triumphal entry. But, in the second verse, something changes:

Ev'ry eye shall now behold him
Robed in glorious majesty;
Those who set at nought and sold him,
Pierced and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing,
Shall their true Messiah see.

The same ones who in the first verse were singing alleluia at the return of the Lord are now deeply wailing, for they see that the Lord who returns is the same one that they had pierced and nailed to a tree. Just as we all take up into our mouths the voice of the crowd at Jesus' monkey-trial and yell out: "Crucify! Crucify!" We all nailed the Messiah to a tree, we all like Judas sold him. You can perhaps imagine the terror of seeing and knowing that the Lord of Glory has been crucified, and to know that we did it.

But in the third verse, their wailing changes into rapture:

Those dear tokens of his Passion
Still his dazzling body bears,
Cause of endless exultation
To his ransomed worshipers
With what rapture, with what rapture
Gaze we on those glorious scars!

Those who were wailing when they saw that it was the same one whom they had crucified, now see that he yet bears the scars of his crucifixion. When they gaze upon those scars, those tokens of his passion, then and only then is there rapture. Then and only then do they see that the Ascension of Jesus Christ was necessary. Then and only then do they see that the Christ's suffering and death were truly for us, for those he came to save, even those who crucified him, the Lord of Glory. Jesus Christ yet bears his scars for us. Jesus Christ yet holds before his Father the work and the suffering that he did on your behalf, and on my behalf, on behalf of the whole world.

So it is that on this day we remember that the scars that Jesus Christ bore in his perfectly and completely human body, went up into heaven. On this day we remember that the scars earned through the love of God for his human creatures ascended into the very heart of God, forever, never to be shed, never to be scorned or abandoned.

On this day we remember that our Lord went away up to heaven so that he might share all of our pain, make all of our pain his own, his very own. As Jesus said to Paul on the road to Damascus, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*." Because Jesus Christ has ascended, the suffering of the Church is his suffering, the pain of his Body, the Church, is the Head's pain, Christ's pain. It is because Jesus has ascended into heaven that our suffering and pain are shared by him, it is because he sits at the Father's right hand that he is with us in our suffering and sorrow. As Jesus says in John's Gospel, if you knew that I was going to my Father you would have rejoiced (14:28). We can, with the disciples who saw Jesus ascend, rejoice that the Son goes to return to his Father, for he bears with him to the Father's bosom his scars and our pain. He is going away up to heaven, bearing his humanity to the throne of God. He is going away, bearing the scars of his self-offering on our behalf. He is going away, to be with us. To him be all honor and glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. Amen.