

Mark 16:14-20 (Ascension)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
May 26, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Ascension is one of the most neglected festivals of the church year. Maybe that's because it follows soon after Easter and so Easter tends to overshadow Ascension. It could also be that Ascension always falls on a Thursday. People are so busy they don't think they have time to come to church in the middle of the week, no matter what the occasion. Even many pastors and churches are tempted to ignore Ascension because they are scared nobody will come to the service. Or it's too much work to plan another service. Whatever reasons there are for downplaying the Ascension, the root of it all is that so few Christians understand the importance of this day. Many think of Christ's ascension into Heaven as a sort of afterthought, an offhand explanation of why Jesus is no longer with us. We confess every Sunday in the Nicene Creed that Jesus "ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father." But what does that mean for us today? This evening we consider the importance of Christ's Ascension into Heaven for our salvation and for our daily lives.

The Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into Heaven is not a going away party. Jesus was not saying goodbye to His eleven closest friends before moving to a new location. The Ascension is not a "permanent change of station." When Scripture says that "the Lord Jesus, after he has spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God," it does not mean that there is now a great chasm (Lk 16:26) fixed between us and Jesus. Mark 16 continues by saying the eleven "went out and preached everywhere, while *the Lord worked with*

them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs.” The Lord who ascended into Heaven continued working with the disciples in their ministry. He went away, yet He’s still here.

That’s because the right hand of God is not a place. Jesus did not levitate into the clouds, and then beyond the clouds through the atmosphere and up and up into the universe until He came to the location of God’s presence. No, God is outside of space and time. The right hand of God is not a place in our universe; it’s a designation of God’s authority. Just like kings in the ancient world would have a right hand man, an advisor to rule everything for them, so is Jesus the Father’s right hand man. Jesus at God’s right hand means that Jesus “upholds the universe by the word of His power” (Heb 1:3). Angels, authorities, and powers, indeed all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, are subject to Jesus (1 Pet 3:22). The same reality is portrayed in Matthew 28, where Jesus tells His disciples: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” As God, Jesus always had this supreme authority. Now, since the Ascension, Jesus exercises His lordship of the universe as both God and man in one person.

For a time our LORD made Himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant (Phil 2). The Son of God descended from Heaven by becoming man, incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. This same God-man then endured the cross (Heb 12:2), suffering and dying for the sins of the world. By His death He swallowed up death, and so even the grave could not hold Him. After rising from the dead, Jesus continued teaching His disciples for forty days until He “ascended far above the heavens, that He might fill all things,” as Ephesians 4:10 puts it. The Son of God took on human flesh and blood, and with that same flesh and blood He died, rose from the dead, and returned to the Father in Heaven. There, in Heaven, a man now sits on the throne of God. One of your relatives, a descendant of Adam, a descendant of Noah, sits on God’s throne. The prophet Daniel’s vision is now a reality: “with the clouds of heaven there came one

like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan 7:13-14). The Son of Man on God’s throne is at the same time the Lamb on God’s throne, to whom the whole company of Heaven sings: “Worthy are you . . . for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” (Rev 5:9).

Our Lord’s Ascension into Heaven is no less important for your salvation and for the salvation of the world than His incarnation, life, death, burial, and resurrection from the dead. Everything Jesus did and does matters for your salvation. We see the ongoing importance of Christ’s Ascension for our salvation in the letter to the Hebrews, which describes Jesus as the Great High Priest. The lamb who was slain and now sits on the throne is at the same time our great High Priest. The role of the High Priest is to stand between God and the people, making intercession on our behalf. Just as Aaron and the priests of the Old Covenant would enter the most holy place with the names of the tribes of Israel on their breast, so does Jesus enter the throne room of God as our representative. As we sang in our opening hymn, “Now our heavenly Aaron enters with His blood within the veil” (LSB 494). Only Jesus can fulfill this role completely because only Jesus is both God and man. Only Jesus can represent both sides of the covenant. He is a priest who is like us in every way, a human like the rest of us, but without sin. This priest has passed through the heavens (Heb 4:14f.) and now reigns in heaven on our behalf, constantly making intercession for us before the throne of God (Rom 8:34).

Having Christ as our High Priest in Heaven means that we can now draw near to the throne of grace in confidence, knowing that there we receive mercy and find grace to help in

time of need (Heb 4:16). We who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, Jesus has reconciled in His body of flesh by His death in order to present us holy and blameless and above reproach before Him (Col 1:21-22). Jesus stands before the Father as the perfect man on our behalf. He lived for us and died for our sins, reconciling us to God. And now Jesus stands ever before the Father in Heaven so that when God looks at sinful man, He only sees His perfect Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. All your sins, absolutely every one of them, are covered by the blood of Christ and in turn, His righteousness, all of it, is accounted to you.

Jesus remains the eternal source of mercy for you so that when you are troubled by your sins, by death, or by the devil, you can flee to your Lord for mercy and consolation. When you are in the hour of deepest need, wherever and however that might look, Jesus is there on the throne of God ready to help in time of need. Call upon Him in the day of trouble and He will deliver you (Ps 50:15). Jesus sympathizes with you because He is human, like you. But unlike other men, Jesus also has the power to help you in whatever situation you're in because He is the eternal God, ruling all things by the word of His power. Remember that you are genetically related to the God of the universe. God's Son did not take on phantom flesh. No, when God became man, He took on the same flesh and blood you have. The ruler of all things is related to you and you are able to approach Him as a brother, so draw near to the throne of grace in confidence, knowing that there you will receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Remember, also, that Jesus did not go away when He ascended into Heaven. The Ascension is not about what we've lost but about what we've gained. Christ ascended into Heaven not to depart from this world but that He might be present with His Church in a different way, in a fuller way. Jesus ascended into Heaven, indeed, far above the heavens, that He might

fill all things as both God and man. Yet Jesus chooses to come to us in very specific ways. Jesus can do anything He wants to, and so He uses that authority and decides to come to us in ways we can grasp Him: He comes to us in His Word and in His Sacraments. Even when we were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ in Holy Baptism. More than that, God also raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6). Christ is the Head, from whom the whole body of the Church is nourished by God's Word and knit together (Col 2:19). Having been baptized into Christ's body, the Church, we now exist where Christ, the Head, is located. Baptized into Christ, we stand before God the Father in righteousness and purity forever.

In the Lord's Supper, the risen and ascended Lord chooses to come to us with His very body and blood in the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. The God-man reigning over all things can be present however He wants, and so He decided in His great wisdom to come to you in the Sacrament of the Altar. Our Great High Priest manifests Himself before this altar, and on this altar, where He condescends to serve you. Jesus is both the Host of this meal and the meal itself. Jesus serves both as priest at this altar as well as the sacrifice upon the altar. Here, in the Lord's Supper, our Lord manifests His presence among us in a way we are able to receive Him.

Jesus did not ascend into Heaven to leave us to our own devices. No, Jesus ascended into Heaven that He might be with us and with the whole Christian Church on earth at all times. Jesus is with us in His Word and Sacraments until He returns to earth in the same way He ascended into Heaven: visibly, before the eyes of all people. Jesus did not remove Himself from this earth; He simply removed His visible presence. Jesus went to the throne of God to stand as our representative before the Father, to serve as our Great High Priest and to intercede for all members of His Body. We can now approach the throne of grace daily, confidently trusting that

for the sake of Jesus we are heard and cared for. We can approach the God of the universe as our brother, even as He, our brother, continues coming to us in His Word and Sacraments until the end of the age. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.