

Mark 16:14–20
Ascension
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
May 18, 2023

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,

We celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas and the death and resurrection of Christ during Holy Week and Easter. Those two major festivals of the Church year, Christmas and Easter, are still somewhat known and understood today. Yet the other two major festivals of the Church year, Ascension and Pentecost, have been neglected in our churches. We confess every Sunday in the Creed: “I believe . . . in . . . Jesus Christ . . . who . . . ascended into Heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father” and “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” In the Church, Pentecost is more well known since it falls on a Sunday, fifty days after Easter. But Ascension always falls on a Thursday, forty days after Easter. In the world there’s hardly an inkling of what we’re actually celebrating today. In Germany, Ascension Day is a federal holiday, and it is also celebrated as Father’s day, which is often spent hiking in the woods and overindulging. That’s become much more common than attending church on Ascension to celebrate our Lord’s going to His Father, who is also our Father (John 20:17). Sometimes the impression is given in the church by what we say and do, or by what we don’t say and do, that our Lord’s Ascension into Heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit are just additional information—a nice touch to an otherwise complete story, like adding: “And they lived happily ever after.” The Ascension becomes a way of explaining why the resurrected Jesus is no longer with us. This evening, however, we’ll see that our Lord Jesus Christ did not ascend into Heaven to go away. No, Jesus ascended into Heaven that He might be even closer to His Church, both in heaven and on earth, at all times and places.

Jesus validated His continued presence with His miracles. Today, He validates His presence with His miraculous Word and Sacraments. The Ascension is an integral part of our faith and life, then, because it is the ascended Lord Jesus who remains with us until the end of the age.

The Gospel text for Ascension comes from the last chapter of the Gospel of Mark, where we see how much all the disciples doubted, not just Thomas. “Afterward,” that is, after Jesus appeared to the Emmaus disciples and opened their eyes to understand the Scriptures, after that, “He appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and He rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw Him after He had risen.” Faith is based on the testimony of others and ultimately on the testimony of God. Before Jesus’s ascension into Heaven and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the disciples didn’t understand what was going on. Their eyes were still closed in a spiritual sense to the reality of what had just taken place in Jesus’s death and resurrection. The disciples didn’t believe the testimony of those who had seen the risen Lord. Jesus then appeared to the disciples and many others during the forty days after Easter, proving that He had, in fact, risen from the dead. Our Lord also continued teaching about the Kingdom of God.

Even then, the disciples still did not grasp the significance of what had occurred. They were still expecting Jesus to restore an earthly government. Just before the Ascension, the disciples asked Jesus: “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus had shown many times that His kingdom is not of this world, but they didn’t understand. They wanted something immediate and something tangible. They wanted God’s Kingdom on earth right now.

Despite this major misunderstanding, Jesus commissioned the disciples for their new work, the work He had been training them for the whole time. Jesus said to His disciples: “you

will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Jesus says: “Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation.” These weak, doubting men were given the monumental task of preaching the Gospel in the whole world and to all creation. Of course, on their own they couldn’t do it. Only the Holy Spirit working through the disciples would be able to carry out such a charge.

Jesus then says exactly how that message will be received, that the preaching of the disciples in the whole creation until the coming of the New creation: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” The preaching of the disciples is a matter of salvation or condemnation, a matter of eternal life or eternal death. Those who through the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit believe the good news, the Gospel of salvation will be saved eternally. They recognize themselves, according to God’s Word, as sinners in need of a Savior and that God became man in Jesus Christ to take their sins away in His death on the cross. They recognize that Jesus died for their sins and rose again for their justification, their being declared righteous in the sight of God.

Those who believe also recognize that Jesus has applied that salvation to us in the here and now, through specific means. Jesus says: “Whoever believes *and is baptized* will be saved.” Baptism is not an extra work thrown on at the end, as if you have to drum up enough faith and then go get yourself baptized. Both faith in what Jesus has done for you and baptism are works of God by which the Holy Spirit has raised you to new life.

Faith and Baptism always hang together. Some are given faith and then they get baptized, like the Ethiopian eunuch who heard the Gospel and then coming across water said: “What prevents me from getting baptized?” Some are baptized and given faith, such as all those

nameless members of households who were baptized in the book of Acts, or like all the infants baptized into the faith and preserved in that faith since the earliest days of the New Testament Church. Like circumcision in the Old Testament, most Jewish men received the gift of circumcision and incorporation into the people of Israel as children. But some were circumcised as adult converts. So it goes with Baptism as well, which Paul calls “the circumcision made without hands” (Col 2:11). Some believe and are baptized. Others are baptized and believe.

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, *but whoever does not believe will be condemned*. Jesus does not say: “whoever does not believe and is not baptized will be condemned.” The only thing that condemns is unbelief, which is not so much a matter of intellectual understanding, but a lack of trust in what God has done for us, a falling away from the promises given in Holy Baptism. Whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Jesus then outlines the signs that would accompany those who believe. These miraculous signs actually came to pass as the apostles began taking the Gospel message into the whole creation. They are signs by which Jesus validated the teaching of the Apostles, not necessarily gifts we ought to be looking for today. As St. Peter tells us in his second epistle, “we have something more sure, the prophetic Word” (2 Peter 1:19). Of course, God could still work in this way if He so desired. There are often stories of miracles taking place especially when the Gospel first comes to a new location, as a spiritual war is being waged. Jesus says: “in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

Demons were cast out by Jesus and the disciples throughout Jesus’s earthly ministry and throughout the book of Acts as well. Even today, we talk about the casting out of the unclean

spirit in Holy Baptism to make way for the Holy Spirit. Demonic possession is still a reality, and by all accounts a growing phenomenon as western culture reverts to paganism.

Speaking in new tongues, or in new languages, miraculously occurred at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit gave the apostles the ability to speak in languages they had never studied, and people from all over the world heard the Gospel message in their own languages. Even today, the Gospel and all of God's Word are being translated into different languages around the world. The Holy Spirit is still active in human speech.

At the end of the book of Acts (ch. 28) we have an example of the picking up of serpents. When the Apostle Paul was on the island of Malta, a viper latched onto his hand. Paul shook the snake into the fire and suffered no harm. In the early 20th century, some churches in the southeastern United States implemented snake handling, sometimes with deadly results. Other churches have had their people drink rat poison as a test of faith. There are no examples in Acts of drinking poison, but in 2 Kings 38, the prophet Elisha purified a poisoned stew. We are reminded of Psalm 91:10: "no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent." The Lord will command His angels concerning believers, but we also ought not put the Lord our God to the test (Matt 4:7).

The last sign, miraculous healings, occur throughout the book of Acts (28:8), and in James 5 we are told: "the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up . . . the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." Healings were part of the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, serving as validation of the message being proclaimed. We continue praying for healing according to God's will, recognizing that whether we live or die we are the Lord's. So we don't place all our hope in being healed in this life. Our hope is in Jesus Christ and in the life to come, when we will finally be healed of all diseases and infirmities.

“So then the Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to them, was taken up into Heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs.” The “right hand of God” is not so much a place as an indication of the power Jesus has. Jesus did not ascend into heaven to go away and leave us on our own. He ascended far above all the heavens that He might fill all things (Eph 4:10), that He might rule over all things as a king’s right hand man would carry out the king’s orders. Jesus rules from the Father’s throne as King of kings and Lord of lords and He sends His ambassadors, first the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and now His pastors, His shepherds and teachers, into the whole world, to teach and to baptize.

And wherever the Church goes, Jesus is there too, confirming the message by accompanying signs; maybe not picking up serpents and drinking poison (although we ought never dictate to the LORD what He can and cannot do), but always in the greatest signs of Word and Sacrament. The testimony of Jesus and the Apostles was already proven by the signs of that day. Now we have that testimony clearly laid out for us in the Bible. And the church continues to be recognized by her Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, among other marks. The Church will always be located where God promises the Church will be, wherever the Word is proclaimed purely and the Sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution. There, where the Church fulfills Christ’s mandate of preaching, baptizing, and observing all things whatsoever He has commanded, He promises to be with us always, to the end of the age (Matt 28:19-20). There, where the preaching of the Gospel and the sacramental signs are located, the Holy Spirit creates faith in people the world over. There, the crucified, risen, *and ascended* Lord Jesus Christ rules over all things until He returns on the Last Day to judge the living and the dead and to usher in the new creation that will have no end. In the name of Jesus, Amen.