

Acts 1:1–11
Ascension
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
May 9, 2024

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,

The Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ is one of the most neglected high festivals of the liturgical year. In the Church, you often hear jokes about nominal Christians who can only seem to make it to church on Christmas and Easter. But the other festivals that are almost as important as Christmas and Easter—the festivals of Epiphany, Ascension, and Pentecost—remain mysterious even in the Church. They can come across as celebrations only for the initiated, for those who have reached maturity in the Christian faith and are granted access to the sacred mysteries of the church year. But these other festivals of the church year need not be so mysterious. They are as much a part of our piety as Christmas and Easter.

Maybe the reason modern Christians often neglect Ascension is that it always falls on a Thursday. In Germany, Ascension is a federal holiday. It's also celebrated as Father's Day, since Jesus says: "I am going to my Father and your Father." Having the day off could help focus the mind on the importance of this day, but that's a luxury many people don't have. And hardly any Germans celebrate this day for what it truly is.

Another reason Christians might neglect Ascension Day is that they don't understand the importance of the Ascension for our faith. The meaning of Christmas and Easter are apparent. We celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, His death for the sins of the world, and His resurrection from the dead. Those are of course the pillars of our faith. But the meaning of the Ascension is a bit more foggy in people's minds. Why did Jesus ascend into Heaven? What is the meaning of

His Ascension? Why should we be happy about it? What is truly the importance of His ascension into Heaven and His session, or sitting, at the right hand of God the Father? That's what we'll discuss tonight on this festival of the Ascension.

Where is Jesus? That's the question. Most of the world, if they know about Jesus, think He died like any other man. They think the writings inspired by the Holy Spirit are simply fabrications or wishful thinking. Some of the most deluded, against all historical understanding, don't even think Jesus was a real man. So where is Jesus? Some think He never existed and some think He died on the cross and then rotted in the grave.

As Christians, we know, of course, that our LORD rose again from the dead. It's not possible for death to keep a hold on the author of life, on the one who is life itself. Life triumphs over death. Light triumphs over darkness. Jesus rose from the dead in victory! All Christians know and confess that Jesus is alive. But where is He? Why don't we see Him? Did Jesus disappear, like He did after speaking to the disciples on the road to Emmaus? Did Jesus hide Himself, as He did when He hid from the Jews who wanted to stone Him? Did Jesus change His form, like at the Transfiguration? Jesus could remove His presence in any of these ways. But He doesn't. Jesus didn't disappear. He didn't hide Himself or change form. He ascended into Heaven. He was standing in the presence of His disciples on the mount of Olives and was then lifted up. He rose into the sky—levitating, you could say. And then a cloud hid Him from sight and the disciples couldn't see Him anymore.

It's common for people to hear the account of Jesus's Ascension into Heaven and still think of it the way a child would. They think too much in localized terms, that if you keep drilling down and down you'll reach Hell, and that if you keep flying upwards you'll reach Heaven. Jesus kept going up and up and up into the sky. A cloud hid Him, but not in the way it

would hide an airplane or a spaceship. Jesus didn't keep going up and up beyond our atmosphere, to another planet or to another galaxy or to the outer limits of the universe. He went to Heaven, which is described as way up there, in the clouds, but is in all reality a different kind of existence. Where is Heaven? Our small human brains, limited by time and space, can't wrap our heads around the place where God dwells. But where God dwells, however you can describe that, that's where Jesus is.

Jesus is now seated at the right hand of the Father. As Hebrews 1 says: "After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." People mistakenly think of Heaven as a physical place in this universe. And people mistakenly think of the right hand of God as a physical place, the way it's often portrayed in artwork, like God the Father has a really big hand and Jesus is sitting on it. But what really is the right hand of God? The right hand of God indicates God's power and authority. Just like Joseph was elevated to become Pharaoh's right hand man, the one to rule all of Egypt in place of Pharaoh, so is Jesus now "the right hand man." He rules over all things, in Heaven, and on Earth, and under the Earth. He upholds the universe by the word of His power.

The right hand of God is not a place; it's the position Jesus is in by which He can say: "All authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to me." Jesus is God. He descended to this earth in the incarnation. He took on our human flesh and blood, our body and soul, to redeem us from sin, death, and the Devil. And then He ascended into Heaven and is in control over all things as the God man. Your flesh and blood relative, a man you are related to, Jesus Christ, is on the throne. You are related to the one who rules all things and He's on your side. He loves you. He cares for you. He preserves you. He orchestrates all things to work for your good. You have connections at the very top, direct access to the King of kings and Lord of lords. That's the

beauty of the Ascension. Jesus's ascension is His taking up again everything He controls as God. He ascended His throne once again and He's brought you with Him.

Many, many Christians think, whether consciously or no, that the Ascension of Jesus means He's no longer with us. Practically they think of the Ascension as if Jesus is now far removed from us. That He went to the throne room of God to take care of more important business. These Christians could not be further from the truth. Jesus did not ascend into Heaven to leave us alone. He ascended into Heaven to be with us always. Let me repeat that. Jesus did not ascend into Heaven to leave us alone. He ascended into Heaven to be with us always.

So many Christians, like those first disciples, continue thinking in an earthly way—in a fleshly way. “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” The disciples still thought Jesus came to rule a kingdom of this world. But Jesus says: “My Kingdom is not of this world.” That's also what the Ascension shows us. Jesus's Kingdom is not of this world. It's not an earthly Kingdom, like the United States or Germany. Jesus has no intention of ruling from the city of Jerusalem or from the nation of Israel. The truth is greater than that. Jesus rules from the New Jerusalem. He rules the true Israel of God, the Church. The Ascension of Christ is proof that the Kingdom of God is so much greater than any earthly kingdom—greater, even, than the sum of all earthly kingdoms. His reign includes the kingdoms of this world, but it's not limited to this world. His is an eternal Kingdom and you are part of that Kingdom even now.

Jesus did not ascend into Heaven to get away from this world. He ascended into Heaven to rule His Church in an even more intimate way. If Jesus had simply established an earthly kingdom, then we would have to make a pilgrimage to see Him. We would have to take a number and wait in line to bring our requests before Him. But as it is, He who descended, Jesus Christ, also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things. That's what the

Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 4. Jesus didn't ascend into Heaven to leave us behind. Jesus ascended into Heaven that He might fill all things—that He might be closer to us than otherwise would be possible. Jesus ascended into Heaven so that now, where two or three are gathered in His name, there He is in the midst of them. Here we are, gathered in the name of Jesus. Jesus is among us as surely as He was among the disciples. Jesus ascended into Heaven that He might come to us in His Word. Jesus ascended into Heaven that He might come to us and bring us to Him in the waters of Holy Baptism. Jesus ascended into Heaven, that He might come to us with His Body and Blood in the Lord's Supper, where He feeds us with Himself for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus ascended into Heaven to be with us and all Christians always—at all times and places—until the end of the age.

And just as the disciples saw Jesus ascend into Heaven, so will all people see Jesus when He returns on the Last Day to judge the living in the dead. As the angels said: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into Heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into Heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into Heaven." As he ascended and the clouds hid Him from sight, so will He descend on the clouds. And every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him (Rev 1:7). Take heart, dear Christian. Straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Lk 21:28). In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.