

Alleluia! Christ is ascended! He is ascended, indeed! Alleluia!

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

"And when [Jesus] had said these things, as they were looking on, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. And while there were gazing into heaven as He went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and 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'" (Acts 1:9-11).

Just imagine the sight. The apostles and disciples staring off into the sky – gazing up into heaven. They gaze after Jesus until they can no longer see Him.

Just imagine what they were thinking. We have some ideas. They just asked Jesus, ***"Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"*** (Acts 1:6) So, is the Ascension the way Jesus will bring back the old days of King David and King Solomon, when the Kingdom of Israel was the greatest? Is this the way Israel would become free from Roman domination and become a world power? You see, this was the hope of many in Israel.

To that question, prior to His Ascension, Jesus says to them, ***"It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority"*** (Acts 1:7).

So, it was not for them – *or us* – to know when God would bring His great plan to completion. However, it is enough to know that He has a plan for His kingdom and that His will is gracious and good. God has marked the calendar, and He has marked the day and made a note of the hour. Until that day, no one on this side of heaven knows the day and the hour of Christ's second coming, the date of Judgment Day.

But there is something to note from this exchange. Before His Resurrection, when Jesus was in His state of humiliation, He did not exercise His divine knowledge to the fullest. He had said then that He did not know the day of God's judgment. He said, ***"No one knows about the day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father"*** (Mark 13:32). But here, Jesus does not say that. Here, Jesus says, ***"It is not for you to know"*** (Acts 1:7). In other words, ***"I know."***

From His Word, we know that Jesus' kingdom is not political, but spiritual. We know that Jesus' kingdom is not limited to the Jewish people, but includes all who trust in Christ, which is the spiritual Israel.

Again, they are looking intently up into the sky. They stare even as the last clouds fold Him in. What's next? Has Jesus left them? Has Jesus left us? They gaze after Him, but He is gone. Jesus has vanished.

Do you ever have times when you wish that Jesus wasn't so far away? Do you ever ponder the idea: "Why Jesus, why do you permit all this evil to happen?" Our human understanding of the Ascension can lead us to think that Jesus is far, far away. But is that really the case? Has Jesus really abandoned us?

The Ascension was visible for the sake of the apostles. The very moment the clouds hid Jesus from their sight, He was transferred timelessly into the heavenly glory. Jesus is now visible in heaven with the same body, including His scars of triumph over the cross and grave.

Suddenly, two angels stood by them and 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***" (Acts 1:11).

You see, Christ departed visibly, so He shall return visibly. He ascended into heaven, so He shall descend from heaven. He ascended bodily, so He shall descend bodily.

In this in-between time, what does Christ's Ascension mean to us? St. Paul gives us the answer in tonight's epistle: Jesus is now seated at the right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named. He has put all things under His feet and is head over the Church (Ephesians 1:20-22).

Now, does this mean that Jesus is away from us as He rules in heaven? No! This means that He rules in heaven and on earth. Through His Ascension, Jesus is reigning His death and resurrection over us, which means that He has the power to be everywhere and anywhere. He is no longer bound to a bodily, visible, tangible, and worldly way of life, to time, place, space, or the like. Through His Ascension, Jesus is now present and rules through His power everywhere, in all places and at all times, when and where we need Him. Jesus says, "***Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age***" (Matthew 28:20).

You see, Christ's Ascension is all about bringing us His Means of Grace. He ascended so that He can distribute His sacrificial gifts to His people everywhere and anywhere. Again, Jesus Ascended so that He would no longer be bound spatially. He Ascended, so that He can truly be with us always to the end of the age in, with, and under His Word and Sacraments.

Because Jesus is Ascended into heaven and has all power and all authority, His Means of Grace are no mere symbols or simple remembrances of what He has accomplished on our behalf. No! They are the Means by which Christ gives Himself through His Word and Sacraments. His Means of Grace have both authority and power, right and might to accomplish that for which God has purposed them.

What is this purpose? Forgiveness of sins, which begets life and salvation! The Means of Grace created your faith in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and strengthens your faith through Absolution, the Word, and the Sacrament of the Altar.

Through the Means of Grace, we are joined to the very same crucifixion and resurrection in the waters of Holy Baptism. It is a Baptism in which the Holy Spirit gives us faith as we live as God's holy people.

Through the Means of Grace, the cross is placed upon us in Holy Absolution, wherein repentant hearts receive forgiveness of sins.

Through the Means of Grace, Christ feeds us His very Body and Blood under the bread and wine, given to us Christians to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of our sins in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Being forgiven through the Means of Grace, we mutually forgive one another.

So, the Ascension of Our Lord is not a time of mourning. Jesus has not left us. He did not retire when He ascended. He has not deserted us. He continues to be involved and be in charge. His Ascension is all about our comfort, peace, joy, and confidence.

While Jesus ascended from His apostles' and disciples' sight, being carried up into heaven, He raised His hands in blessing (Luke 24:50). His hands remain lifted to bless us, to bless our witness and our worship.

Imagine the awe and delight of the angels and archangels as the Son of God returned as also the Son of Man with all power and all authority in heaven and on earth, where He rules with grace and mercy, where repentance for the forgiveness of sins is preached.

Jesus is not absent. He is still with us in His Means of Grace – *His Word and Sacraments* – where He promises to be until He bodily returns on the Last Day. **Alleluia! Christ is ascended! He is ascended, indeed! Alleluia!** Amen.

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

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +