

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

[The Ascension]

When Jesus and His apostles met on the Mount of Olives, the apostles were full of great expectations. They asked Him, "***Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?***" (Acts 1:6). This question is puzzling. After all they had experienced with Jesus, they ask *this* question. It appears that they were still expecting Jesus to establish a kingdom here on earth that, in some respects, would be like other earthly kingdoms.

But at the same time, the apostles also believed that this kingdom of God would be one that would bring them spiritual redemption. They were expecting forgiveness of sins won by their Messiah, Jesus, and all the blessings for the soul which flow from forgiveness.

So, Jesus responds saying, "***It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority. But 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 1:7-8).

As Jesus spoke these words, He began His ascent into heaven. With the eyes of the apostles resting upon Him, they witnessed Jesus being slowly and visibly lifted up. They see all of this with their own very eyes as the witnesses they were to be.

There was an awed silence over the apostles. Their eyes are wide with astonishment as they follow Him and strain in their looking and then a cloud took Him out of their sight. From this event, we confess this great article of faith in the Creeds: "***He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty***" (Apostles' Creed).

Although Jesus had vanished and appeared throughout those 40 days since His bodily resurrection – *to the Emmaus disciples on the road, to the apostles in the locked upper room twice, at the Sea of Tiberias, and various other appearances to many* – the apostles knew that something was different here. Jesus had never vanished from their sight in *this* way.

So, the apostles do what we would naturally do: stare into the sky. They stare even as the last cloud folds Him in. They gaze after Him – but He is gone.

The ascension was visible for the sake of the apostles. The moment the cloud hid Jesus from their sight, He was transferred timelessly into the heavenly glory. Jesus is now visible in heaven with the same body that died nailed to the cross and lay in the grave.

The obvious questions now for the apostles are: “Now what?”, “What’s next?”

So, as they stare, two angels in white robes appear and say: **“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). This question intends to turn their minds from mere astonishment to more important thought. You see, the Ascension and the Last Day go together.

[He Shall Return]

Christ departed visibly; He shall return visibly. He went to heaven; He shall come back from heaven. He went away bodily; He shall return bodily.

This is what the two angels spoke to the apostles. The presence of these angels marks the Ascension as one of Christ’s saving acts. Remember, when two angels appeared at the tomb on that Easter morning? What did they say? **“Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how He told you, while He was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise?”** (Luke 24:5-7). The angels did not just appear previously to proclaim the resurrection. They also announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds saying, **“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”** (Luke 2:10-11).

Today on this Ascension of Our Lord Day, we know that because Jesus is risen from the dead, by faith in Him alone, we will also rise! Since Jesus ascended into heaven, we will also ascend! You see, the Ascension of Christ is a feast to celebrate!

So, as the apostles stood staring, these angels brought the glorious promise to them at this great moment that Jesus will come again in the same visible way.

But someone may ask, “How can Jesus be visible to everyone when He returns? If He returns on one side of the earth, how could people know on the other side of the earth?”

Oh, believe me, everyone will know. God is God and we are not. He is the Creator of heaven and earth, so He is capable of accomplishing everything.

So, Jesus will **not** announce His return on a television talk show or announce His return to you privately at a street corner. And if anyone does say he is Jesus, you ought to know that that man is a fraud, since He will not return in secret. So, don't be fooled by people claiming to be Jesus. When Christ returns, there will be no mistaking Him. For He will return from heaven in the same way He ascended into heaven. ***“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God”*** (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

The day of Christ's return will be a day of comfort for all in Christ. It is a day of promise for us! But we also know that He will return as the Judge who will strike paralyzing fear into His foes (Matthew 24:30; Revelation 1:7) as He will say: ***“I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. Acknowledge Me”*** (Revelation 1:8). But because He is and remains our Savior, the sight of Him will fill our hearts with overwhelming joy. For He will be our acquitting Judge, the Judge who will speak to us these gracious words: ***“Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”*** (Matthew 25:34).

[Sitting at the Right Hand of the Father]

Today, we live in the age between the Lord's ascension and His return in glory on the Last Day. During this time, He is hidden from our physical sight, but He is not absent. The Lord's promise of His continuing presence concludes the Gospel according to Matthew: ***“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”*** (Matthew 28:20). Jesus is ascended, but He is still present.

For some Christians, they take Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father to be a literal location. So, for them, Jesus is stuck in heaven, so it's impossible for Him to be with us here today. Now, how do they account for His resurrection appearances? They say He just snuck through a window or snuck in and out when the people weren't looking. So, to this they say, “The body of Christ is enclosed in heaven, so He cannot be present in more than one place at a particular time.”¹ But, if this is the case, then Jesus **is not** fully God. Since Christ is true God, He is indeed present everywhere. He has ***“ascended far above the heavens, that He might fill all things”*** (Ephesians 4:10).

¹ *Book of Concord*, Formula of Concord: Epitome, Article VII: Holy Supper. The Reformed argued that Christ cannot be present in the Lord's Supper, since He was trapped in heaven.

So, when we confess He “*sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty*” and as our Epistle proclaims today that God the Father “*seated Him at the right hand in the heavenly places*” (Ephesians 1:20), we are not confessing that Christ is confined or restricted to a place, but that He again has full use of all His divine powers that were His before He took upon Himself our human flesh at His incarnation. So, “right hand” means strength and power, and not a restriction. Again, the “*right hand of God the Father almighty*” is not a location, but instead an office. If Jesus was confined, He would **not** be with us always, to the end of the age.

So, for a time, Jesus willingly relinquished much of His divine power as a man, but now that He has returned to heaven as man and God, He has again taken up full use of His divine power. At the Ascension, Jesus was exalted into heaven. On earth, His exaltation was His crucifixion. But His Ascension is His triumphant enthronement as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Today, because the ascended Christ is not only God, but God and man united in one Person, therefore wherever He is, He is present as God and man. This means that He is not only present as God, but He is present also as man, with His Body. Christ is bodily present in the Lord’s Supper, where He gives us His body and blood to eat and drink for the forgiveness of sins.

In this time between the Ascension and His return, the presence of Christ for us is a hidden presence as we no longer physically see Him as a man or audibly hear the words from His mouth. Nevertheless, His presence is not spiritual in the sense that He has nothing to do with this world. Otherwise, how would we identify His presence? He is present to us and speaks to us through His Word, as it is proclaimed and read. These words are not simply written by man; they are not simply words spoken to our ears, or printed signs to our eyes. No! Through the Holy Spirit-inspired Scriptures, Christ speaks to us. For the Church is the assembly of believers around the Word and Sacrament. Around the Means of Grace, the Church gathers around the hidden, yet powerful presence of Christ.

So, the Ascension of our Lord is not a time of mourning. Jesus has not left us. His Ascension is all about our comfort, peace, joy, and confidence. 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 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 as He rules all things for the sake of His Body, the Church.

Even though He reigns in heaven, He still carries for us the marks of His crucifixion. He is the Lamb who was slain, who ***“is above all rule and authority and power and dominion”*** (Ephesians 1:21). He blesses us with forgiveness, lifts us up in His hands and seats us with Himself ***“in the heavenly places”*** (Ephesians 1:20). Alleluia! Christ is Ascended! Amen!

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

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠