

Sermon Ascension 2019

June 2, 2019

Luke 24:44-55

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Ascended Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Ascension of our Lord.

He led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God. I was struck this week by those words. I was struck as I reflected on the disciples having joy in the midst of the Ascension of our Lord. After all, when you have to leave the company of someone you care about, I am guessing you don't consider yourself as joyful when returning home from the airport to drop them off their flight. And yet the disciples are joyful. How is that the case?

Well, to start we should make the point that we so often conflate joy and happiness as though they're the same thing. They're not. Sometimes you can be very joyful, but not happy. Last week I mentioned the Pastors' Conference I attended that week before, well that same presenter I mentioned said something well. We were talking about having joy in the ministry and as we were talking about not confusing joy and happiness, he said that he was joyful but often grumpy. His point was that he still clings to the faith with great joy, joy which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit and not our work—and yet often he could be grumpy. I think we can say that the disciples had this joy in the same way. They may have been saddened instead of grumpy, but joyful because of what they knew from our Lord. As we say that, then we should ask what they knew that made them so joyful. So what did they know?

Well first of all, we see that our Lord told them they were witnesses to His work. He sent them out as witnesses of what He had done, of what He had come to do. Look at what it says, **“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”** Certainly there was joy that the work of God was being fulfilled, certainly there was joy that they were given the honor to bear witness to this work.

Now think about what that meant. Think about what we see in the Book of Acts. Think about what we see in the history of the Church. Did this witnessing always go well for them? Did they prosper in their earthly wealth through it? Not so much, right? Think about it. We see in Acts Stephen being stoned to death. We hear of Paul being

persecuted, stoned as well—although he didn't die from it. Tradition tells us he was eventually killed for this witness, though. Likewise it tells us that Peter was killed for it. In fact Tradition tells us that nearly all of those in Jesus' hearing that day died because of their witness to the faith. And yet joy in that. Joy in that sending. Joy in the work.

Of course, a part of that joy in that work, and in the sending came, from what they knew the Lord was doing as He ascended. Now, I know I've made this point before, but when we see Jesus ascending in the First Reading from Acts, what does Luke tell us there about that ascending? Where does Jesus go? Well, it sounds on the surface like Luke is just telling us that Jesus went up in the sky, but listen closely: **when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.** Did you hear what happened? A cloud took Him out of their sight. What's that mean? Is Luke just making sure he includes the details? Well to some extent, sure. Sure, he wants to make sure people know just what happened and how it happened. But think about the cloud for those disciples. These were good Jews. They knew the Old Testament. What does the cloud mean for them? Where do you think of a cloud in the Old Testament? Well you likely think of the glory cloud in the Exodus. The Jews are rescued from the bondage to slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt, they're led through the Red Sea, and what leads them? Well Moses does, but what does he follow? The pillar of fire by night and the? The pillar of cloud by day. The cloud. The cloud which is the presence of God. So when Jesus ascends He goes into the presence of God. And this brings joy. How?

Well look at what Paul says about that: **what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.** In other words, when Jesus goes into the presence of the Father, the disciples understand He's at the right hand. Not a physical position, but one of honor. He sits next to the Father with the honor of interceding for us. You see that position of the right hand, the right hand man, he would sit next to the king and have his ear. When people would come into the court of the king and seek for their cases to be settled the man at the right hand of the king was his most trusted advisor, the one who would have the most input on the case. Jesus has input on our case. He intercedes for us. These disciples knew that He would intercede for them. How? Saying what? Saying, "Look Father, they're trying their best, just give them a break!"? No. "Look Father, look at the blood I shed for them. Have mercy for my sake." And this intercession brought joy for the disciples.

Likewise, that position meant other authority as well. Look at what else Paul says. After he says that the Father raised Jesus to His right hand, he says **“far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.”** And there the disciples knew the authority and power Jesus really had. Think of the joy in that. Think about the comfort that brought them as they were persecuted. They knew that this Jesus was sitting at the Father’s right hand, and was there pleading for them, working all things to their good in that authority. Did it always look it? Did it always feel good? No. But there was this joy in it.

How did they know? Because of what Jesus said in the gospel lesson. And as you hear this, understand this is the heart of all of this joy. This is the center of all of the joy that they have in the midst of this: **“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”** They knew that the joy was that this Jesus who was ascending before their eyes, actually was the Immanuel, the God with us, who had descended from heaven, who had entered into the flesh of man—taken on their very flesh—that He might take their sin upon Himself and die on the cross that their sin would be forgiven.

Think about the joy of that. God in the flesh taking on sin. The Holy God taking on their unholy sin. The Creator of the Universe working all things to their salvation. Bleeding on the cross but rising again for new life. And then this ascension. He ascended fulfilling what He says in John 14. He goes to prepare a place for them that where He is they might be also. Jesus is going and where He’s going He’s going to take them with Him. He’s going to prepare a place in the mansion of their Heavenly Father. This was the joy of the disciples.

Christians, this is your joy too. All of this is true for you as well. You are given the joy of bearing witness to the work of Jesus, confessing it in this world. There might be hardship from this, but it’s a joy. And it’s a joy because of the fact that this Jesus intercedes for. As you look around at the world you might so often see reason for fear, for sorrow, for sadness. And there is definitely reason for that. And that reason might cause you to sway and doubt. But Jesus intercedes for you. He speaks into His Father’s ear that plea for mercy for you. Not because you’re trying your hardest, but because of His blood shed for you.

And Christian this joy is yours because He works all things for the good of His Kingdom. He has all things in His control. Does this mean that the world is always going

to follow the revealed will of His Law? Not since sin, but it means it will all work to good for His people. I was thinking about this with the abortion law that passed this week here in Illinois. If you got the email, you saw that it was forced through in a devious and backhanded way. But even in the midst of that we can know that Jesus is still in charge. Not that His desire is for the death of babies, but that somehow this works toward the end of accomplishing the bringing of faith and strengthening in faith of the elect. That's our joy, your joy.

And then most of all the forgiveness of sins: the greatest joy. That the God who is good and holy would have mercy on you and not give you what you deserve. But that He took your sin upon Himself, your most seemingly insurmountable sin to your most seemingly insignificant thought of sin, all of it upon the cross that it is forgiven. Dying and rising for it. And in the authority that He has, working things out that you would be baptized into that forgiveness and life; that you would receive that body and blood in the assurance that this is for you.

And in that assurance, the promise that where He is He will take you also. And in the midst of all things we see that this is our joy as Christians. We can so easily become attached to the things of this world. We can so easily pour our hope into this life, but the real joy is in knowing that we will be with Jesus eternally.

This May was the fifth anniversary of my installation here. I've been here five years, and in those five years I've been alongside many of you in times of sorrow. Some have been times that have been hard, but not too hard for you to bear. Others have been heart-wrenching in the depth of the sadness that came from them. But in all of it, my hope is that you would see how Jesus was drawing you toward this hope of the life to come. That you would look not toward the joy found here in this world of sin, in the satisfaction of your sinful nature. But that you would look to the joy found in the ascension.

Look to that joy, Christians, that same joy the disciples had. Look to the joy of this Jesus who calls you to confess to this broken world the love with which He entered into it. Look to the joy of this Jesus who sits at the right hand of the Father interceding and pleading for you, working all things to your good. Look to the joy of this Jesus who came into this world to die for your sins, and who ascended that where He is you may be also. Look to this Jesus and have that joy. As the disciples saw Him go, they were joyful. May you know that joy as well, today and in all things. Amen.