

He Ascended into Heaven

Last week we considered what it means when we say in the Apostles Creed “He [Jesus] descended into Hell.” We concluded that the resurrected Christ, some time after his death on Good Friday but before Easter morning, literally went body and soul to the “citadel of the devil” to proclaim the victory of His death and imminent Resurrection. This is a comfort and good news to Christians because it tells us that Jesus is Lord of all and that nothing, not even Hell, can separate us from His love.

Our first lesson this week, from Acts chapter 1, tells us about Christ’s Ascension and lends itself to an examination of the statement in the Creed which says, “He [Jesus] ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father...” Again we ask, “What does it mean that Jesus ascended and sits at God the Father’s right hand? Of what significance is that to us and our faith?” And again, the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions, those doctrinal statements from the 16th century that we agree are accurate, faithful interpretations of Holy Scripture, give us clear, definitive answers.

Christ’s Resurrection was for the absolution, the justification, the salvation of the whole world. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to his followers for forty days. He wasn’t constantly with them as he was before His death, but he appeared to them on many occasions. Jesus conversed and ate and drank with them. He ate, not because He needed food, but to prove that he was really alive, both in body and spirit, and not just a ghost. Ever wonder what he talked to his Disciples about? There is no need to wonder; Jesus keeps no secrets from us about anything that we need to know. You can be sure that main points of what Jesus told His disciples all got into the New Testament, which Peter and John and the others, led by the Holy Spirit, wrote down for us. There is no secret knowledge that only certain Enlightened Ones know. Everything you need to know about salvation is right there in the Bible.

The Risen Jesus was seen by all His Apostles and more than 500 other witness. The Resurrection is not just a matter of faith; it is an undeniable historic fact. However, the exact moment of His resurrection from the dead was not a public event. No one saw the exact moment in the tomb when his dead, limp body revived. What was that like? No one knows.

Perhaps you are familiar with the Shroud of Turin. Some people claim it is the authentic burial cloth of Jesus. Others claim it is an elaborate fake. The Shroud does contain an image of a man, who could be a first century Jew, in photographic negative, whose wounds would be consistent with death by crucifixion. Some scientists who have examined the Shroud of Turin say it and the image are an absolute mystery, leaving room for it to be Jesus' real burial cloth. Others claim it is from the twelfth century and not to be taken seriously. At least one scientist I read said that the image could have been caused by something like a nuclear reaction that occurred at the moment Jesus came back to life.

In some ways I want to believe the Shroud is authentic, because it would be nice to have scientific confirmation of our faith. In other ways, it doesn't matter if the Shroud is real or a fake because we know that the Resurrection is true from the witness of the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. In a similar way, whereas the moment of Christ's resurrection was private and secret, in contradistinction His Ascension was public and for many eyewitnesses to see. The Ascension is an important confirmation of our faith, infinitely more important than any religious relic or scientific theory.

The Latin theological term describing Jesus' Ascension is *motus localis*, meaning literally "a local upward movement." Jesus moved upward until a cloud received him. That is hard for us to picture. It doesn't quite fit our modern mind-set. I don't think the Ascension testifies to a three-story universe, as some people interpret it, with a Heaven

above, a Hell below, and the Earth in the middle. That's not what this event is about. The point is that Jesus the Son was returning to God the Father and being taken out of this earthly sphere so that the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Paraclete, could come. Jesus went to be seated at the right hand of the Father. The direction of Christ's movement is immaterial because Heaven, as we said on Easter Sunday, is wherever God is, and God is everywhere. If people back then imagined God's abode to be above the sky, how much more logical then that Christ's apparent movement would be upward.

We can look at the Ascension then as a "public and triumphant certification" of Christ's enthronement as our Savior and King. He went up to reopen Paradise and prepare a Kingdom for us. We also see in the Ascension then too a promise as that Christ was raised from the dead and raised up to the Father in Heaven, we who love and trust in him will also be given new life and taken to live with Him eternally. Christ is the first fruits of the dead, the pioneer of our faith. We will follow where He has led the way.

Of what significance is it that Christ is said to "sit at the right hand of the Father?" In that ancient culture, to sit at the right hand of a king or oriental potentate was to be seated in the most powerful spot. "At the Father's right hand" is a short hand way of saying that Jesus is in control, He is in charge, all the power and authority are His. Jesus exercises this power and authority in at least two ways.

For one, from God's right hand Jesus directly guides human affairs. Jesus is constantly, actively involved in human lives, in our lives, in your life. Nothing happens with out his knowledge. Nothing happens without his permission. Jesus definitely has a plan for our lives. There are no doubt things he wills for us, and they are all good things. Scripture says God works out all things for the good for those who love him. Jesus' will is that we would all have happy, healthy lives. But it doesn't always work out that way, does it?

Why not?

Things are not perfect in the way God wants them to be perfect for us because he also gave us free will. We used our free will to sin, and through sin death, disease, and disasters entered our world. Sometimes we mess up our lives. Sometimes someone else or some event mess our lives up for us. That is not what God wants for us, but He allows it to happen. Why does God allow such things? Only God Himself knows for sure, but we can be sure that in all things God is with us, helping us, and that in the end all will be well. God even takes the calamities of life, and although we may not understand it at the time, He turns them to our advantage. Therefore, we should accept whatever comes to us, seemingly good or bad, with gratitude and reverence for God's choice. That's hard to do – I know, I fail at that all the time – but God will always do what is best for us. Someday we will understand, when we get to Heaven.

The other thing that Jesus does from the right hand of the Father is to intercede for us. He prays for us. What does He pray? He prays for mercy on us. He prays that we might be forgiven, and we are forgiven. Jesus prayer is effective because he presents to God the offering of His very own blood, which covers over and washes away the multitude of our sins. In Jesus we have a friend in a very high place, the highest place, and He, as they say, is pulling a few strings for us. How terrible things would be if Jesus wasn't on our side!

So when we say, "He ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father," let us rejoice and be glad. Jesus is risen. **He is risen indeed!** And he is leading us, watching over us, and praying for us, until that glorious day we join Him on high. Amen