

Where Is Jesus?

Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-11

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

May 8, 2016 – The Ascension of Our Lord



Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This week, on Thursday, the Church observed the festival of the Ascension of Her Lord – an event which was an important part of His saving work – an event which took place, according to the record of Holy Scripture, 40 days following His resurrection. The Gospel account of this event, though quite brief, is also quite clear. Having celebrated it each year you are all certainly familiar with most, if not all the details. In fact the details are so simple that Luke uses only a total of 5 verses in this Gospel and in the Book of Acts to record it. And with similar brevity, Mark uses only 1 verse. He writes: “So when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.

But we mustn’t allow the significance of this day to be diminished or downplayed simply because of the conciseness of the record. Indeed, because of the importance of the Ascension, the Church has included it in her Historic Creeds, and has always seen it as one of the fundamental doctrines of the faith – standing side by side with the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, Christ’s two natures, and His suffering, death and resurrection. But why is the Ascension so important? How can it take its place alongside Christmas and Easter as a festival equal in stature? Well, at Christmas we confess who Jesus is and why He entered this world of sinners. During Holy Week we proclaim what this Jesus has done through His death and resurrection to redeem us. And in the Ascension a very fundamental question is answered, namely: “Where is Jesus?”

Still and all, despite the magnitude of this event, the Church in most places doesn’t celebrate the Ascension on the actual day it occurred. Perhaps it’s because very few fully grasp its importance or the significance of the answer to the question: Where is Jesus?” But whether you realize it or not, this is an important question to answer, for does Scripture not teach that we are to “seek the Lord where He may be found?” And to do that, don’t you need to know where He is? So, to assist you in more fully appreciating all this, consider what it would be like if Christ

hadn’t ascended! Think of Lazarus, Mary and Martha’s brother, whom Jesus raised from the dead. What happened to him after his resurrection? Either he died again at some later date, or he’s still walking around somewhere. I think it’s safe to assume that at some point Lazarus died, and is now with Christ awaiting the bodily resurrection on the Last Day.

And apart from His Ascension, the same would be true of Jesus. Either He died and we have a dead savior, or He’s still somewhere out there preaching and teaching. But thankfully, by His grace, God has not left us to speculate about this, but instead teaches us where Jesus is to be found. Now sadly, for many, the Gospel is little more than just some collected teachings about Jesus – most specifically, what He’s done for the salvation of the world, and how those who follow Him are to live. And while this may be important, this understanding of the Gospel has no need to know where Jesus is! And that’s not to say the historical record concerning Jesus isn’t important – but Christianity is a whole lot more than simple history. The Gospel is much more than just the story *about* Jesus! The Gospel *is* Jesus!

In a peculiar sense, then, liberal Christianity – with its denial of the historical Jesus – and reformed, fundamentalist Christianity – which often relegates the Gospel to nothing more than information *about* Jesus – have become strange bedfellows. What I mean is that both these groups have rendered the question, “Where is Jesus?” meaningless. Yet even within authentic Lutheranism, where the confession of the real presence of Jesus has been so carefully maintained, the significance of the question, “Where is Jesus?” is being lost. We’ve become too accustomed to speaking of Jesus’ omnipresence as if it were the same thing as His Gospel presence. In other words we think: “I know Jesus is with me, because Jesus is everywhere.”

Now certainly the Scriptures teach that Jesus is always everywhere. But, is that fact a comfort? No doubt there’ve been times when the knowledge that God is everywhere might comfort you, but does it always? Was the knowledge that God was right there with them a comfort to Adam and Eve? After the fall

into sin, when they heard God walking in the Garden, were our first parents glad to see Him, or were they afraid and tried to hide? Was God's omnipresence a comfort to Jonah when he tried to flee from Him and the task He'd been given to bring God's Word to the Ninevites? When David wrote in the Psalms about the fact that there was no place he could go to escape God's presence or Spirit was he comforted? No, he was in anguish.

It's true that later David did find comfort in the fact that God was always with him, but not while chafing under the weight of sin unconfessed and unforgiven. In fact just the opposite was true. That was why in the 32nd Psalm David lamented: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer." So, if like David, you understand the enormity and reality of your sin as revealed by the Law of God, a Gospel apart from Christ's presence will be no Gospel for you at all! The omnipresence of God can have no comfort apart from the very real, specific presence in which the graciousness of God toward man is revealed unconditionally in the person of Jesus Christ! For you see, the omnipresence of God is a knowledge of God which isn't limited to Christians – and is therefore no Gospel at all. Rather it's built upon the shifting sand of human experience, and understood through the fickle revelation of human emotions and natural knowledge.

On the day of our Lord's Ascension, the disciples of Jesus – looking up into the sky – found no comfort, because even though only moments earlier they had seen Jesus ascend into the heavens, they had no idea where He had gone. It was only after the angels appeared to them that they returned to Jerusalem and to the Temple. And why did they return to the Temple? Because the Temple was the place where God had promised to meet His people. Remember, Pentecost hadn't yet happened. The Holy Spirit had not yet enlightened their hearts and minds with a full comprehension of what Jesus meant when He said them that He would not leave them as orphans, but would later come to them. "After a little while the world will behold Me no more," He told them, "but you will behold Me. Because I live, you shall live also. In that day you shall know that I am in My Father, you are in Me, and I am in you."

Later they learned that the Temple would no longer be that place where they were to meet God and receive His gifts of forgiveness, life, peace and salva-

tion. For when the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles 10 days later at Pentecost, He opened their hearts and minds to see that what had gone on in the Temple was no longer needed. Christ had bound His presence to a greater miracle than slaughtered animals and sacrifices. The Temple of Christ's body had taken the place of everything that before had been rooted in the Temple. Christ's body, given in death and restored on the day of the resurrection, would never die again. And this same Jesus, fresh from His victory over the devil, raised from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father, has now bound himself to the Apostolic Office through which His Word is proclaimed, and in which the Sacraments are administered according to His command. And that, dear friends, that is where Jesus is today. He's in His Church – Baptizing, absolving, preaching, and giving forth the gifts of life and salvation in His very own body and blood. And though these things are done with human hands, the truth of the matter is that it's really Jesus Baptizing, absolving, preaching, feeding His people and giving eternal life.

So in answer to the question: "Where is Jesus?" on this celebration of the Ascension of our Lord, with the Church of all ages, we also believe and confess that He is precisely where He promised to be. And that, dear children of God, is pure, sweet, comforting Gospel! It's Gospel because when you meet Jesus where He has promised to meet you, a miraculous thing takes place! Through the simple, ordinary means of Word, water, bread and wine, Christ makes you one with Himself! Literally, He puts you and keeps you in communion with Himself, and thus with the Father by the power of the Spirit. All that Jesus is, and all that He has done for the fallen people of this world, is here personally given to you. When you were Baptized, Jesus put you to death and raised you to new life. Your sin became His sin, and your death His death. And in exchange, His holiness became your holiness, and His righteous life yours. With His Word He breaks your sinful pride and self-righteousness, tears down your idols and idolatry, then, in that place where He has promised to be, He gives you Himself – speaking by the mouth of His servants to forgive Your sin and grant you life. May it always be so for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.