

The Fruit of the Ascension

Acts 1:1-11

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

June 2, 2019 – The Ascension of Our Lord (Observed)



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In Psalm 68:18 King David spoke prophetically about the power and fruit of the Ascension of our Lord, saying: *“You have ascended on high, You have led captivity captive: You have received gifts for men; yes, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them.”* And so it is now, that on this occasion, as we celebrate the Ascension, I’d like us meditate for awhile on that article of the Christian faith where we confess what St. Luke recorded for us in the first chapter of the book of the Acts of The Apostles – that Jesus Christ, God’s Son and Mary’s Son, our very Lord and Savior, ascended into Heaven to sit at God’s right hand to rule and reign over all things for the good of His Church until that Day when He returns in the clouds of glory with all His holy angels to gather us into His mansions above, where we will dwell for all eternity. It’s for this very reason that this Festival was established – so that we might remember it, hear about it, learn of it, and firmly believe it because of the great comfort it gives for our life on earth – and also for the assurance it gives us of that life which is yet to come.

But there is also a stern warning here – namely, that Christ *is* coming again. In fact, St. Paul says that this is to be our “anathema” – or, our “curse” – against those who trouble or persecute us: namely, that Jesus *is* coming again! And make no mistake about it – the fact that Christ will return one day is a warning to us all that we must never allow ourselves to become lax and careless, falsely boast of our faith, or claim that we rely on God’s grace and mercy to help us, when the truth is that we are addicted to sin. The fact that we are “saved by grace through faith” must never become, for us, a mere “motto.” We must always realize what these words mean: that the depth of sin in us is so great we can never pull ourselves out of it – that it’s only because God has given us this great, undeserved gift of faith in the grand and glorious appearing of His Son in human flesh – and that His Son, in turn, has given us the enormous, unmerited favor of His own perfect obedience to God’s Law and His holy, precious blood shed on Calvary’s cross to save us. Only when you recognize this, can you avoid those twin evils that would like nothing better than to maim and kill you as you travel life’s perilous road on your way to heaven – those evils which hope that you’ll either fall off in the ditch of self-righteousness on the one side, or into the ditch of false security which has convinced you that you have a license to sin on the other.

King David, St. Luke, and the Apostles of our Lord – borne along as they were by the Holy Spirit – give us not only the bare, naked story of the Ascension – that is, how Jesus instructed His Apostles and was then visibly taken from them into the clouds of heaven – but they also teach us the effect and meaning of Christ’s Ascension – and what its purpose was. By their words, we’re made ready for the Day of His return. We’re neither made to be lax and self-secure, nor are we allowed to wallow in despair as we see the day of judgment approaching. St. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4 about this event when he first quoted the words of King David – and then expanded on them. This is what he wrote: *“When {Jesus} ascended on high, He led captivity captive and gave gifts to men.”* According to St. Paul, Christ’s Ascension took place to establish a new, everlasting Kingdom whose throne will endure forever – a Kingdom whose reign is concerned only with what’s best for those who are Christ’s, and is founded only upon the never-changing Word of God which has been given to Christ’s followers as an eternal inheritance to preach to the farthest corners of the world until the Day of His return.

Other kings – as Luther would say – don’t ascend above the clouds to seize and take possession of a land on earth, for when they die their kingdom and rule comes to an end. But Christ’s Kingdom is not of this world. It’s a Kingdom none of us can yet see except in those glimpses God gives us in His Word – most especially when He grants new life through water and the Word here at the Font – and when He feeds His body and blood to hungry sinners here at the Altar. This Kingdom of Christ’s Church, like His Ascension, is an article of faith. You can’t see it in an absolute sense. You can only believe and confess it on the basis of Christ’s promise – and because you know that He ascended and was received as King into the glory of Heaven.

So, what kind of Kingdom is this – since it’s neither visible nor worldly? It’s a Kingdom that’s been established by the conquering of some similarly invisible – yet, nonetheless, very real foes. Again, King David writes: *“You have led captivity captive, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them.”* Listen to what Dr. Luther had to say about this text. He wrote: “How magnificently and majestically all this is said! He has ascended on high and sits above in Heaven, in order to imprison the prisons and chain up the

stocks! In other words, Christ takes captivity itself captive. He binds forever what has bound us. He imprisons what has imprisoned us. He holds captivity itself in captivity. He causes death to die and no longer be death for us. He causes sin to die, so that it is no longer a blot on our account. He casts Hell into a Hell of its own for us, so that it suffers and cannot harm us any longer. In short, He has overtaken and overthrown Satan's Kingdom so that everything which previously sought to oppress us is now itself oppressed – so that even what's intended by others for evil is used by God for our eternal good. In Christ all things are reversed in our favor, because our King has made the rules – and all of them for our benefit!"

Of course, the people of our world understand captivity in an entirely different way. They understand it as handcuffs, prisons, gallows and electric chairs. They understand captivity as the restriction of freedom to live, to move about, and to do whatever a person likes. However, the captivity from which Christ frees us, is a greater, more extraordinary captivity – a captivity which even we captives often fail to see! It's a captivity which appears to allow us to do as we please – and we all like to do that, don't we? The "Old Adam" – the rebellious sinful nature that still clings to us all – wants to be "unfettered" and have the "freedom" to sin. It wants to take hold of us so that we give up real faith in Christ for a false security that allows us to follow our flesh and do whatever sin wants us to do. It wants us to be wretched, melancholy, despondent, and despairing when we see how unholy and abandoned by God our lives often appear.

But in actuality this is the whole nature of sin. It lures you in with the "sweetness" of "freedom," "self-gratification" and "fulfillment." But afterwards it drives you to despair as it finally opens up the book of accounts and holds before your eyes those things you've done which ought to make it "impossible" for God to love you any longer – so that you must despair and suffer eternal death – that is, captivity in Hell, apart from any of God's comfort or love forever! Taking God's super-abundant grace as a license to sin, and thinking Christ's blood which washes away all sin gives you the "freedom" to live as you desire, is nothing other than trying to set the captivity that Christ has made captive "free" once more – so that it can take you as its prisoner again! Dear friends, your response to sin, temptation

and despair must be the same as it would be to any other power which might seek to persecute you – namely that you thank our Lord for having taken this thing captive, so it can no longer take you as its prisoner! Only then can you confidently say with the Hymnist: "Satan, I defy you! Death, I now decry you! Fear, I bid you, cease! World, you cannot harm me. Threats, you can't alarm me. Christ has taken you captive, and given me peace! Hence, all fear and sadness! For the Lord of gladness, Jesus, my priceless Treasure, has entered Heaven and rules all things!"

This great work, King David says, God's Son accomplished "even for the rebellious" – yes, even for we who might believe that we've sinned far more than anyone else in the world. That's why the Good News of this work has been given to be preached to the ends of the earth – and until the end of this world – through the mouths whom Christ has given to the Church as a gift, namely His pastors. And this is the same Good News God has given to each of you to declare to one another as you go about your daily vocations. This is the Good News which ensures you that you need never again be taken captive by sin, death, or the devil. This is the Good News which gives you the power to resist your captors – which is not your own power at all, but only the outcome of the faith by which our Lord Christ has taken captivity captive, and thereby has set us otherwise helpless captives free.

This then, is the power and fruit of Christ's Ascension – and likewise the power of faith in what Christ has done and who He is – that you might now exercise His dominion over the sin that formerly held you captive – that you might rebuke its temptation and accusation by saying to it: "My Lord has taken care of you and made you a powerless captive. He has Baptized, absolved, fed me, and made me an heir of His Kingdom to rule over you with Him." Though sin still ensnares us, we cling to our Lord Jesus Christ, who has taken captivity captive and won for us the victory. He alone shall soon appear as the angel said, coming in the clouds with great glory to take us to His – and our – heavenly home. To this same everlasting King, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be praise and thanks forever and ever. 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.