

Lectionary Readings: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Sermon Title: *Happy Endings*

Prayer: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of [our] heart[s] be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, [our] Rock and [our] Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)*

Salutation: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:2)

Text: The Word from God through which the Holy Spirit comes to stir our hearts as we observe the Ascension of Our Lord, is from the Holy Gospel according to St. Luke, the 24th chapter.

Introduction: Dear friends in Christ, if you like books or movies, you know that one of the most important parts of a good story or film is the ending:

- What happens to the characters?
- Do they live happily ever after?
- Is there a tragic ending?

Of course, most people like happy endings.

On Ascension Day, we celebrate a happy ending to the mission of Jesus that liberates humans from sin and death. So today, as we consider a happy ending to the mission of Jesus: THE ASCENSION HELPS US CELEBRATE THREE ENDS.

I. First, the ascension of Jesus marked the ending of His mission on earth:

- His mission began when He had willingly come down to earth as a little human baby.
- Then, He took more than thirty years to earn our liberty.

And it was hard work – living a perfect life, proclaiming the kingdom, doing miracles, suffering pain, being crucified on a cross and buried in a tomb, rising to life.

Jesus reminds the apostles of this in the words of our text:

“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. Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (vv 44-45).

You see, after His resurrection, for forty days Jesus proved He was really alive. Then, it was time to ascend to heaven to a hero’s welcome. St. Luke records for us in our text the account of Jesus’ ascension:

“And [Jesus] led [the apostles] 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” (vv 50–51).

As we consider Jesus' ascension, nations honor returning heroes with parades. For His enormous victory:

- Jesus was honored by being seated at the right hand of the throne of God.
- That His sacrifice was accepted by the Father.
- And, with His resurrection, all believers in Him will rise to eternal life.

Thus, Christ's work of salvation done!

And, the apostles, of course, were happy to see Jesus alive in His triumph over the grave. However, they were also bewildered about losing Him as their leader.

So, the challenge for Jesus was to show how the end of His physical presence was not the end of an illustrious career. Jesus wasn't going to go into retirement. He was going to remain active through the apostles for the purpose of accomplishing the saving of people – people like you and me.

So He said to them: *“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. You are witnesses of these things”* (vv 46-48).

Therefore, Christ's mission to liberate the world was complete in one way. Jesus said from the cross: *“It is finished”* (John 19:30). And, it was. It is.

II. But in another way, Jesus' mission was just beginning. There was no more dying to be done for sins. Yet, that salvation was to be proclaimed to the end of the earth. Jesus said at His ascension to the apostles: *“You will be My witnesses . . . to the end of the earth”* (Acts 1:8).

This is the second end to think about on this Ascension Day. That is – the extent, the limit, how far it is that we are to go with the good news. For years, we've had the vaccines to prevent polio. But in some parts of the world, people didn't know it and so still suffered horribly from this cruel disease. Therefore, it was necessary to bring knowledge and medicine to them.

Today, we have the COVID-19 pandemic. We have the hope that treatments will be found and approved, and/or a vaccine will be developed soon. That we may bring knowledge and medicine to people that, suffering and death may be prevented.

So, it is with the message of forgiveness in Christ. If it's to be helpful for people, they need to know what it is. For it to be helpful for you, someone had to bring you the message. It may have been a friend, a parent, a preacher, a teacher.

You see, it is through the sharing of that Word, of which the Holy Spirit opens hearts and minds to believe and to live:

- Today, Luke 24 spoke of how Jesus opened the apostles' eyes to the truth about Him in the Bible (vv 45-47).
- In Ephesians, Paul prays that the Ephesian saints' "*hearts and minds may be opened*" to see the great riches of salvation that are theirs through faith in Christ.

Therefore, we might say, the Holy Spirit is in the delivery business. What is a delivery business? For example:

- Delivery businesses are booming with online sales these days.
- Trucking companies don't produce anything. They deliver objects others have made.
- Trains deliver tons of grain and coal and cars that have been produced elsewhere.

The church, too, is in the delivery business. However, not to deliver the products manufactured by businesses. So, then, what is the church's delivery business? We are here to deliver what Jesus bought and paid for, and He wants to be given freely to the world. Therefore:

- We do not make our own salvation.
- We cannot make another person's salvation.

Yet, Jesus says in our text that "*you are witnesses.*" Now:

- To be a witness of a crime can be a life-changing experience.
- To be a witness of what God has done in Christ also changes our life.

We, of course, were not there with the first disciples to see Jesus on the cross and, resurrected after Easter. And now, forty day later to see Him ascending. But by the power of the Holy Spirit:

- We have firsthand knowledge of Who Jesus is, and what it means to be forgiven.
- We know our destiny as a Christian is to share the eternal joys of Christ in His kingdom. For the angels said to the apostles at His ascension that, He will come back to take us to be with Him.

Therefore, until Jesus comes again, the purpose of your life is to be His witness, sharing the Gospel through which disciples are made – to the ends of the earth, and until the end of time. There is no higher purpose, no greater reward in life, than to have been the instrument through whom God gave the gift of life and freedom in Christ.

III. But clearly, we cannot do it without God's help. Therefore, Jesus gives us the third end to think about: *"I will be with you always, to the very end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20). Yes:

- Christ is with us to the end of time.
- He loves us to the end.

Why? Not only to preserve and protect His people, but so that our mission may be accomplished.

You see, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to us to give us the power to be effective witnesses of what Jesus said and did. Every time Clark Kent had a mission, he went into a telephone booth to strip off his ordinary business suit, revealing his official Superman clothes. However, he could only stop locomotives and lift skyscrapers when he was properly clothed in the outfit that revealed his true identity.

As Christians, we are clothed by God with the Holy Spirit, so that we can do what He asks. You see, in Baptism, we are clothed in Christ – our true identity. And, His promise to be with us always is literally true – for He never leaves.

Though, Jesus does not promise that we will leap tall buildings or even do miracles, He will give us the words we need to say. You see, it's through His Word that He empowers us to do what He asks us to do. For: *"faith comes from hearing the message, and the message through the Word of Christ"* (Romans 10:17).

You and I may wonder about just how much God can do through the life of one person. Well, just look at what happened when the apostles did what they were told: *"And behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high"* (Luke 24:49).

On Pentecost, the apostles received that power. And, thousands became believers.

Today, we have advantages the apostles didn't have:

- We have the opportunity to share our faith freely, to gather for worship without fear of reprisal.
- We have a prosperity they couldn't have dreamed of, means of communication that literally enable us to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth (especially in these days of the COVID-19 pandemic) – if only we had the will to do it.

Conclusion: So, dear friends in Christ, do you like happy endings? With movies, writers and the director decide how it ends. But in real life, God allows us to help write the end of stories. Those who die without faith in Jesus will have a miserable eternity. But all who trust in Jesus will have a happy and blessed ending to their life – eternal peace and joy!

In the name of ✠ Jesus, Who forgives all your sins. Amen.

To God alone the Glory!