

Ascended...and Closer Than Ever Before

(Luke 24:44-53)

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Ascended Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen! Alleluia! Christ is **ascended!** He is ascended indeed! Alleluia! Yes, it is good and right to say "alleluia" on this great feast of the Ascension which we observe today (though it officially landed on the 40th day of Easter, this past Thursday). And even though this day of the Ascension of Christ is so important in the Word of God and in the life of the Holy Church, it is a day that many are confused about. What is this ascension all about?

Well, what it is clearly *not* about is any inference or idea that the Lord Jesus is now *further* away from us; that He was taken far, far away to observe us from His heavenly throne that is totally detached from us His people. No way! Much to the contrary, the ascension of our Lord – when He ascended on high in glory – is a day that has established that our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ **is now closer to us than ever before!**

I would like to point out some important Scriptures from the book of Acts which were events that occurred *after* the ascension. So Christ indeed ascended into heaven, but notice how He continued to interact with His people still on earth:

The first example is the stoning/the martyrdom of St. Stephen. He had proclaimed the Word of the Lord and convicted those he was preaching to. Those who heard him were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him (Acts 7:54) and were on the verge of stoning him, but note what is recorded at Acts 7:55:

"But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."

Stephen had proclaimed the Word of Truth, he was full of the Holy Spirit and He saw the Lord Jesus right before he died! Jesus was there. Jesus was with him!

Consider also Acts 9:3-5. In this Scripture St. Paul in his pre-converted state was known as "Saul;" he was actively persecuting the Church. He was on his way to arrest Christians on the road to Damascus, but this is what the Word of God records:

"...and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are persecuting me?' ⁵And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'"

Jesus – the King of Kings who ascended into heaven – was right there speaking to Saul who was in the process of being converted into the mighty St. Paul. It was Jesus Himself conducting this great work for Paul's re-birth!

Finally, consider Acts 23:11. St. Paul was before the Jewish council and witnessing to Ananias the high priest and the other chief priests. The meeting got violent and so soldiers were commanded to take Paul away into barracks (Acts 23:10). Then, the Scriptures record this in Acts 23:11 which reveals when the Lord Jesus came to Paul again:

“The following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.’”

But this evidence from the book of Acts is just the icing on the cake and it might be argued that the “cake” itself is our Gospel this morning from Luke 24! Our Lord demonstrates that He is always with us as we glean from verses 44-52 in Luke chapter 24:

1. By virtue of the Holy Scriptures “written about [Him].” To have the Word of Christ is to have Christ. Our Lord comes to us through His Word!
2. By virtue of His power to open our minds to *understand* the Scriptures. He is working on you to this day to increase your understanding of His healing and liberating Word!
3. By virtue of the power of the Gospel itself which proclaims that He had to suffer and then be raised from the dead to convert people to God through what is conveyed by this Gospel: namely the forgiveness of sins.
4. By virtue of the powerful ongoing ministry of Christ’s Church with and through which our Lord is always working repentance in the lives of people through His proclamation in His office of the ministry. That is the Gospel works in us to turn us from sin and towards God. Christians are serious about leaving sin behind...this is a sign of Christ’s presence!
5. By virtue of His sending His disciples out to be His witnesses who according to the Word are “clothed with power from on high.”
6. By virtue of His lifting up His hands to bless. He did so for the original disciples and He does so to this day through His office of the ministry.
7. By virtue of being here with us as we worship Him to this day...worshipping Him with joy even in the face of our many trials because we know He has not left us alone.

But finally and most importantly is the ascension itself. It means as the Scriptures teach in our epistle from Ephesians that Christ “fills all in all.” One example of this is the fact that the Holy Spirit is also the Spirit of Christ and where the Holy Spirit is, Christ is. If the Holy Spirit fills you, then Christ is with you. You who are baptized...you know who you received: you received the Holy Spirit; and that means you also received Christ! This is for all intents and purposes beyond our capacity to grasp and yet is true. The Almighty God who is uncontainable – and this is a deep mystery – has at the same time chosen to be with you and to be in you (John 14:20).

So Christ has ascended and it means quite simply dear Christian that He has never been closer to you than He is now. You are never alone. Jesus is with you. His ascension guarantees it. He who is ascended can do anything, and He has chosen to guarantee and to promise that He is with you always! And after this sermon is done, He will demonstrate this promise again in the intimacy of the Holy Sacrament in and through which He gives you His very body and blood.

These are no mere signs; they are the guarantees that the ascended Lord has given us ways to know God is with us!

And these truths confront our sin, because our sinful nature fights against this truth mightily. How easy it is for us to grow discouraged; to lose hope; to think the absolute worst? It is because our sinful nature runs away from the truth that Christ is present. Our sinful nature wants to deny the truth about the ascension. Our sinful nature wants to treat the ascension as some kind of royal send-off. After-all who in his right mind would want to stay in this world? Especially if one has the chance to enter into perfect glory?! Jesus did what He came to do! He accomplished what had to be done in shedding His blood on the cross, but who could blame Him for getting out of Dodge?! He's gone. He's out. He's far away. He's "looking down on us now." It's like Bette Midler's song, "God is Watching Us" or is it entitled "From A Distance"? "God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us...from a distance." And Bette's voice is so amazing...she makes the words sound so compelling, so convincing, but they are misleading; they are dangerous. It sounds like what we really believe deep down, because our old sinful flesh is full of skepticism and unbelief. God is not here. He's gone. And if He does see me, then it is only from a very detached distance...because He is far, far away!

And we take this sinful belief and we allow it to shape our pessimism about life. How can I do this alone? I can't. And *if we were in fact without God and truly alone, then it would be true: we just couldn't do it!* And our sinful nature and the evil one try to convince us that this is in fact the case. We're alone in this dark and lonely universe and if we will only stare into the void long enough, we will give up all hope. When this happens, there is only despair, there is only the loss of hope; and this is what also drives people to live only for themselves, to make life into a big party...to eat, drink, and be merry before we die. And this is the saddest, most depressing picture of life that I can think of. And it is a lie. And it is a lie that in our sin we swallow.

We must repent.

And that word "repent" leads us to what is really important about this great Ascension text. If Jesus is really with us, then something must be going on. You don't have the King of Kings, the risen and ascended Lord present, but have absolutely no impact on you! Of course not! If the ascended Lord is here – and He is – there must be something detectable...and thanks be to God there is!

Our Lord tells us about what is written, about what is true and there are three simple points that we need to see from our Gospel in Luke 24:

1. It is written that the Christ should suffer. (v 46)
2. It is written that on the third day He would rise from the dead. (v 46)
3. It is written that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations. (v 47)

Yes, these are the signs of His presence right here, right

now! The first two points we easily take for granted. After all, how many times have you heard this basic and fundamental proclamation: Christ suffered (and died) for you; Christ rose from the dead for you? And yet, our terrible and nasty habit is to treat these eternal, life-saving truths as old hat; as something that we just take for granted! May it never be!

These truths are as efficacious today as they were when we first heard. These truths which form the core of the saving message that we call "The Gospel" must lead us to the real sign that the ascended Lord is here: this Gospel of Christ's suffering and resurrection is to impact our lives in such a way so as to cause and produce "repentance and forgiveness of sins...proclaimed in his name to all nations." That is, this Gospel produces a drive to live for God; to proclaim the Gospel...to get the Word out so that people who turn from sin and turn to God (that's repentance of course) would as a result by His grace truly receive the forgiveness of sins. We the Church must show the sign that the ascended Lord is with us: we proclaim...but not simply proclaim...but we proclaim "in his name." Why is this little detail of "in his name" important? Because it prepares us for the hardship that will follow!

Why do you think Christians are persecuted? Why do you think people are willing to make fun of Christians? And to put us down? Why do you think there are so many harsh reactions towards the Gospel? Do you think it's because people simply dismiss Jesus out of hand and assume that He is a figment of the imagination? No, because truth resonates. There is an undeniable power about the Gospel. There is a totally unique claim in the Christian faith: whereas all other religious leaders representing the myriad of world religions all died and remained dead; and whereas all other religions and worldviews drive you to work and accomplish for spiritual enlightenment or after-life attainment; the Christian faith is the only faith which demonstrates the power and presence of the Ascended Lord: He conquered death; He is living...death did not defeat Him, but He defeated death...and He does not tell you to do "x, y, and z" to save yourself, but He gifts you with His life...salvation, forgiveness, conversion, rescue, liberation, atonement...being broken out of the bondage of sin and death is FREE! 100%, totally, completely FREE. No one else and nothing else can even come close to that message...and it can only come from the Lord who is risen and ascended and who proves that nothing – not even death – can compete with His power and love. And as we proclaim this "in his name," we might have to suffer for it...but that's ok...we can because we know we are not alone...that's how disciples live...they can go through the trials, because the ascended Lord is with them. How do you do it Christian? How do you endure? It must be that the ascended Lord really is with you; keeping you in His Word; clothing you with power from on high (even as you confess your weakness, He becomes your strength)...and you stand, continuing to rejoice in the Gospel even as you take part in the mission of the proclamation that gives to the world the gift of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. To be in this life; to be a part of this mission is proof in and of itself that the Ascended Lord is leading you; that the Ascended Lord is leading His entire Church!