

Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Ascension Day 2022; Dr Jeff Silcock

Text: Luke 24:50-53

The last part of this evening's gospel reading gives a brief account of our Lord's ascension. Luke tells us that Jesus led his disciples out as far as Bethany, which is not far from Jerusalem, and, lifting his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

There's something here that people find puzzling. Jesus was with his disciples for three years. They were the closest of friends. They developed a strong bond of affection. And now suddenly Jesus leaves them. The gospel story just gives us the facts: Jesus withdrew from them and was carried into heaven. We would expect that the mood was sad and sombre. They were farewelling a dear friend and were not sure when they would see him again. So based on our own experience, we would expect the disciples to be sad. But evidently that was not the case. Because, as we just heard, the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

What's going on here? How can they be so joyful when they have just said goodbye to their dearest friend whom they would probably never see again on this earth? The secret to understanding this puzzle lies in the verse that comes earlier in our text where we read that Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures. And from the scriptures (meaning the prophetic passages in the Old Testament) he went on to explain the meaning of his death and his resurrection. And, of course, he would have also explained to them the significance of his ascension.

And what exactly is its significance. Well, the bottom line is that it is not what it appears to be. The text says that Jesus was taken up into heaven. But that does not mean that Jesus left the disciples, or that he has left us. In fact, just the opposite. His ascension does not mean his absence from us but his presence with us. How so, you might ask. I know it sounds counter-intuitive, but in fact it is a paradox. To put it crudely, Jesus had to go up to come back down again. This is not rocket science but biblical teaching. Jesus' absence is only apparent, not real. Just because we can't see him doesn't mean he is not present. For when it comes to spiritual realities, we need to rely not on our eyes, but on our ears. And with our ears we hear Jesus' promise: I am with you always to the end of the age. And in faith we believe Jesus' words despite what we see or don't see; we believe his promise despite what we feel or experience.

So Jesus really goes away in order to come again — in a different way. While he was on earth, he was confined to one place at one time; now he can be everywhere at the same time. The reason for this is that he is now present with us in his Spirit—the Spirit that he promised and sent ten days later at Pentecost. And his presence with us in the Spirit is no less real than when he was on earth. In fact, after his ascension, he is closer to us now than he was before, more real to us now than he was before. The difference is that his presence is now hidden and that we cannot see him with our natural eyes, but only with the eyes of faith.

This teaching that Jesus' absence is not a real absence but simply his hidden presence is a paradox, contrary to human experience. Let me give you an example. If I go away on a trip, I leave my wife behind. I am absent to her. She may be in my thoughts, but I cannot be physically present with her. At best I may be virtually present if we speak together by Zoom or Skype. But the fact is that I

am absent from her and there is no way that my absence is simply my hidden presence. Human experience tells us that absence is absence.

But with Jesus' ascension, absence is different. When Jesus leaves us to return to the Father, he is never really absent. He may appear absent, but in fact he is more present now than he ever was before, because he is no longer confined by space and time but can be everywhere at the same time. And so he is closer to us now than when he walked the earth. For now he is spiritually present with us everyday, and by spiritually present I mean present with us in and through the Holy Spirit. Luther said that 'When Christ was on earth, he was far from us; now that he is far from us, he is near to us—nearer than we are to ourselves.

But we can go even further and say that Christ is not just spiritually present, but physically and bodily present — in the Lord's Supper. The ascension and the Lord's Supper are closely connected. And if we don't understand the ascension properly, we won't understand the Lord's Supper properly. Let me explain this further.

To begin with, many Christians incorrectly think that because Jesus left this earth to sit at God's right hand in heaven, that his body is now localized or confined to the right hand of God. They think that, while he can be present with us spiritually, he cannot be present with us bodily because his body cannot be in two places at once. But Scripture says it can be, and it is. After Easter, Jesus' glorified body is not subject to any limitations and, like God himself, can be present everywhere at the same time.

The problem seems to be that people often don't understand what the Bible means by the right hand of God. So what does it mean?

Martin Luther helpfully suggests that rather than thinking of God's right hand geographically or spatially, we should think of it as a symbol of God's power. After all, even in the secular world, the right hand is the hand of power and authority. On formal occasions, a visiting head of state will always sit at the right hand of the monarch or prime minister. The symbolism is important. And so it is with Jesus. At his ascension, he is crowned by God the Father as king, in fact he shares this kingship with the Father. So it is only right and proper that at his ascension, Jesus sits at God's right hand.

There is another thing that Luther teaches us that is very helpful to remember. While he said it in connection with Christmas, it applies equally well to the ascension. Luther said that everything that Christ did, he did for us, or more specifically, *for you*. He says that Christ wasn't just born, but he was born *for you*; he didn't just die, but he died *for you*; he wasn't just raised, but he was raised *for you*, and so too he isn't just seated at the right hand of the Father for his own sake, but he's seated there *for you*. In saying this, Luther is trying to stress the gospel, the good news of the ascension. He wants to stress not just the event, but its significance. So he emphasises that all that God did in Christ, he did for you and for your salvation. Again, the good news of the ascension is that because Christ is king and sits at God's right hand for you, we need have no fear of anything, for the most powerful person in the universe is your friend. You indeed have a friend in high places! And he can help you and me and all believers in our every need, so that neither death nor devil can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The problem that some Christians have with the ascension is that they think that Jesus now can only be present with us spiritually, not bodily. But if you think this way, you end up dividing the two natures of Christ and driving a wedge between

his divinity and his humanity. According to this way of thinking, Christ is no longer present with us according to his human nature but only according to his divine nature. But this is an attempt to split Christ's human nature from his divine nature. But ever since the Son of God became a human being at that first Christmas, Christ's divine and human natures are inseparably united in the one person of our Saviour—he is both truly divine and truly human and will remain both God and Man forever.

Finally, if you think that Jesus can only be present with us spiritually, not bodily, then you won't understand the biblical teaching about the Lord's Supper. For if you hold that after the ascension Jesus' body is confined to heaven, then you cannot say that his body is present in the Lord's Supper in, with, and under the consecrated bread and wine. And if you can't say that, you deprive yourself of one of Christ's greatest gifts to his church and the source of immeasurable comfort, especially in times of doubt, temptation, and spiritual anguish. The beautiful and comforting thing about the scriptural teaching of the Lord's Supper is that Christ's presence in his supper is not dependent on you or me, but solely on Christ's word of promise.

And so for all of these reasons, when Jesus withdrew from the disciples and was taken up to heaven, they knew that he had not really left them, but was in fact present in an even more marvellous way than he was while he was still with them on earth. And that's why, despite the fact that Jesus withdrew his visible presence from them, the disciples could go back to Jerusalem with great joy. And that's why we too can be full of joy and sing our hymns of praise to our ascended Lord, because not only will he come again in glory at the end of time, but he comes to us again this evening in his holy supper, as he promised, to bless us, to forgive us, and to strengthen us in our faith.

So let our response be the same as that of the disciples, of whom it is said in the last verse of our text, that they were continually in the temple blessing God. So let us continually be in God's house, praising God and receiving from him the gifts he wants to give us. Grant this, Lord, to us all. Amen.

Pastor Dr Jeff Silcock

26 May 2022