

05/24/20

Ascension

He sits at the right hand of God

Mark 16: 14-20

Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.

And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.

And these signs will follow those who believe. In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues;

They will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God.

And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen.

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This last Thursday was exactly the fortieth day after Easter, and therefore it was for the Church of Christ the high festival of the Ascension of our Lord—the festival we observe this morning here at Old Zion Lutheran Church. It is worth considering why, in the ancient one-year cycle of readings which we follow here at Old Zion, the Gospel-text for this day should come from the Gospel of St. Mark.

We should note that Mark presents to us here a highly condensed version of the history of Christ and His disciples from His Resurrection on Easter morning until the day of His ascension. We learn from the other evangelists, for example, that Jesus appeared to His followers on many occasions after His resurrection. St. Luke tells us that the risen Christ in fact spent a good deal of time—no less than forty days—teaching His disciples and preparing them for their task as His apostles. It is Luke who also gives us two accounts of our Lord’s ascension, one at the end of his Gospel as a fitting conclusion to his account of Christ’s life, and the other—traditionally the “second reading” for this festival—at the beginning of the Book of Acts, as an appropriate beginning to his history of the early Church and the spread of the good news of salvation. From that second account of St. Luke we also

learn of this delightful detail, that two angels needed to jolt the disciples back to reality so that they would stop gazing into heaven and would instead carry out their Lord's instructions. And from Luke's very brief report of the Ascension in his Gospel, we also learn that it was with great joy in their hearts that the disciples returned to Jerusalem.

Yet there is a special reason why it is St. Mark's account which was for so long the Gospel assigned by the Church for this festival. In his condensed version of events, Mark tells us, "(A)fter the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God." That is the language which the Church has used in creedal statements of her faith, the very words we confess every Sunday together—our Lord Jesus Christ "ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty." That is the joyful message of this Ascension Festival.

I

Our risen Lord Jesus Christ, Mark tells us, "sat down at the right hand of God." That beautiful phrase—"sits at the right hand of God"—is a Hebrew way of saying that Jesus Christ now exercises all the power and authority of God Himself. He—the Virgin's Son—now fills all things and sustains all things. He—the God-Man—now rules the world and all of its history, and He does so for the good of His Church, for the good of His people of faith.

For forty days, the risen Christ appeared to His disciples—showed them His wounds, walked with them, ate with them, and taught them to understand Moses and the Psalms and the Prophets so that they would be fully prepared for their work as His apostles to the world. And with His ascension into heaven to sit at His Father's right hand, He made their joy and ours all the more complete. His disciples understood, and we, too, should understand, that the ascension of our incarnate Lord is the final and convincing proof of His victory over sin, over death, and over all the forces of hell.

In his letter to the Christians in the city of Philippi, St. Paul tells us that, for our sakes, the incarnate Son of God—the Lord's Anointed—had emptied Himself and had laid aside the full use of the majesty and power which belong to Him from all eternity. For our sakes, He had made Himself the lowest of servants. For our sakes, He had humbled Himself even to the point of dying for us on the cross. And therefore, Paul writes, "God has highly exalted Him, and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." We

rejoice today because our Lord's ascension to the right hand of the Father announces to us and confirms to us that His work is fully accomplished, and our salvation is complete.

II

And we rejoice today also because our Lord has ascended to the Father's right hand so that He might be all the closer to us. We should note that "the right hand of God" is not one particular place far above us somewhere up in the heavens. God's right hand, of course, is wherever God is, and that means that it is everywhere. The glorious truth of our Lord's ascension to the Father's right hand is that the incarnate Son of God has taken up again the full use of His divine power, so that He now fills all things and rules all things.

That means for us, first of all, that we have a good Shepherd who is not far off. He is close by—closer, as Martin Luther often said, than we are to ourselves—walking by our side, leading us, holding us in His hands, and hearing our every prayer—the ones we utter aloud and also the ones we only express silently in our thoughts.

And it means that He is also there with His saving power in the Gospel-Word that we hear. When we preach and teach what He has commanded, it is our incarnate Lord Himself—He who sits at the right hand of the Father—who preaches His salvation to us. It is Christ Jesus Himself who speaks His Absolution to us, and therefore that word of pardon is filled with the power of His own Breath—the power of the Holy Spirit. He is here with us in that very special way in His holy Supper—really here for us in the bread and the wine with His body and His blood—to seal to us the pardon which He purchased for us at so great a cost. Christ Jesus who sits "at the right hand of God" now fills His Word and Sacrament in order to speak Himself into our hearts—to work in us that faith which receives all that He has done for us, to guide our thoughts and words and actions with His love.

III

In our Gospel-text, St. Mark includes our Lord's command which, in a nutshell, outlines the task which He has given to His people of faith. "Go into all the world," He says to His apostles and to us, "and preach the Gospel to every creature." When we confess in our creed that He "sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty," we are also confessing our confident faith that the One who has given us this assignment is the Lord over all creation and over all history. We carry out the work He has given us with the firm confidence that He is the One who determines all things and who rules all things for the good of His Church.

As St. Mark tells us, to His apostles Jesus gave these special ways of proving to their hearers that they were really preaching God's word—they would cast out demons, be immune to poison, heal the sick. In the Book of Acts we read how every part of this promise of Christ Jesus was fulfilled. But St. Mark records in our text another promise of Christ which is meant also for us as we carry out the work He has assigned to us—“He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” As Martin Luther so often pointed out, this is the promise which fills the waters of baptism. This is the Word of Christ which makes of that water which we administer in the name of the Holy Trinity a “baptism”—a “gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit,” as we say in our Catechism.

Baptism, the Word that He has commanded us to preach, His sacramental meal, His word of Absolution—these are the tools that He has given us to carry out His command, “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.” The festival of our Lord's Ascension is a time when His Church reclaims for herself the joy of that task—to share the word of the cross and of the empty tomb with all who will hear—and the joy of knowing that, as we go about our work, we are not alone. He who sits at the right hand of God is with us. It is His work—the work of the One who has told us through His prophet Isaiah, “My word will not return to Me empty, but it shall indeed accomplish the purpose for which I have sent it.”

May the Holy Spirit keep the joy of our Lord's ascension ever fresh in our hearts. Amen.