

05/16/21

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.

Thursday of this last week—May 13th, exactly forty days after Easter—was for the Church of Christ the Feast of our Lord’s Ascension, and this morning we observe here at Old Zion that high festival of the liturgical year. Every Sunday when we recite our creed together, we confess our faith that, after He was crucified for our sins and after He had risen in triumph over the grave, our incarnate Lord Jesus Christ “ascended into heaven” and seated Himself “at the right hand of God the Father almighty.” On this great Feast-Day of our Lord’s Ascension, we consider the pure Gospel which is packed into those words.

The ascension of Christ is recorded three times in Scripture. In addition to the report of St. Mark in our text for today, St. Luke gives two accounts—the one as the fitting conclusion to his Gospel-record of Christ’s life in which our Savior’s Ascension marks the end of His visible presence with His disciples, and the other in the first chapter of the Book of Acts, as a most appropriate way of beginning the story of the growth of Christ’s Church which is Luke’s topic in that book of Scripture. And it is St. Luke who relates to us a singular detail about the event. He tells us that, after they had watched Jesus ascend until He was hidden from their sight by a cloud,

the disciples returned to Jerusalem “with great joy.” Their honored Master and Teacher—their treasured Friend and Companion with whom for some three years they had traveled throughout Galilee and Judea, their beloved Savior whose resurrection had given them new hope—now would no longer be with them in the same way as before. And yet, Luke tells us, they rejoiced as they returned to the holy city. They knew that their incarnate Lord had now gone to His Father as He had told them He would, and both to them and to us our Lord’s Ascension proclaims the purely good and joyful news of His victory and His exaltation—the peace-imparting news of our salvation, the reassuring news of His continued presence with us.

I

It is St. Mark who, in our Gospel-text, uses the very language of our Creeds to report to us that, after Jesus had spoken one final time with His disciples, He “was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God,” and we need to ponder what that beautiful Hebrew phrase is meant to convey. To be sure, by leaving them and ascending into the clouds, Jesus was making clear to His disciples that their old relationship was now changed—He would no longer be present with them in the way that He was before. And yet those disciples knew, and also we should know, that the “right hand of God” is not any one, limited location somewhere high above the heavens where our incarnate Lord is kept and confined. The “right hand of God” is in Scripture His divine might and His ruling power. God’s “right hand” is, of course, wherever God Himself is, and that means that it is everywhere. That Mary’s Son is seated at “the right hand of the Father” means, as St. Paul tells us, that He “fills all things”—that He, the God-Man, is present everywhere to rule all things through His infinite power.

From the moment that He was conceived in the womb of the holy Virgin, Christ Jesus possessed in full all the same divine attributes—His infinite knowledge, His limitless power over all things, His presence everywhere—which have belonged to Him from all eternity as the Son of God. Yet for our sakes He had laid aside the full use of those divine powers—had “emptied Himself and taken on the form of a Servant,” as St. Paul tells us—so that He might live under the Law for our sakes, pay for our sins with His blood, endure as our Substitute the death we deserved, and for our sakes conquer death in His glorious resurrection. Now with His Ascension, Christ Jesus takes up again the full use of His divine power and majesty. And thus His ascension and His exaltation to the right hand of the Father proclaim to us in the clearest way the full completion of and the absolute success of His saving work. That He is “seated at the right hand of the Father” announces to us that His atoning sacrifice has been accepted as

all-sufficient and that His victory over death is now offered to you and to me. That is the Gospel—the purely good news—of Ascension Day.

II

And to that Gospel-Good News of this festival belongs also this truth—our ascended Lord is now closer to us than ever—closer to us than we are to ourselves. That He is “(seated) at the right hand of God” means for us that our Good Shepherd is with us every moment. He accompanies us during the day; He keeps watch over us during the night; He walks close by our side through every trial and through every sorrow and through every difficulty we must endure here in our walk of faith. He is close by to hear the prayers that we only whisper, close by to read our thoughts and the prayers that we leave unspoken, and close by to care for us with His shepherding love in the way that is truly best for us.

He has ascended to the right hand of the Father also in order to be present with us in our worship. He who fills all things is present in a special way with His grace, as He has told us, where the Gospel of His pardon and life is proclaimed. Where His word of absolution and forgiveness is spoken to penitent sinners according to His command, it is our Lord Jesus Christ Himself who speaks that word and fills it with His redeeming and soul-cleansing power. Where His Church baptizes as He has told us to baptize, it is Christ Himself who applies that washing in the name of the Triune God of our salvation and who speaks His promise into that water. Where the sacramental meal of His body and His blood is distributed according to His Word, there our ascended and exalted Lord—He who sits at the right hand of the Father’s power—is both Himself the Server and Himself the grace-filled nourishment for our souls which we receive there at His altar.

The One whose Word we proclaim, the One to whom we give thanks, the One whose praises we sing—He is not at all distant. He is seated at the right hand of the Father, and it is our special joy on this Ascension Sunday to contemplate this truth—that means that He is right here in our midst.

III

“He was received up into heaven,” Mark says in our text, “and sat down at the right hand of God.” St. Luke informs us that, as the disciples kept looking heavenward even after Jesus was hidden from their sight, an angel appeared to them and told them that He would come back in the same way that they had seen Him depart. On the Last Day, when He brings the drama of this earthly existence to its final conclusion, our Lord will return in all His divine majesty, heralded by the trumpet of heaven and surrounded by all His angels. And until that Day of His return, He has given to His people of faith—to us, His Church—this assignment, “Go into all the world and

preach the Gospel to every creature.” That was the task which His apostles sought to carry out for the rest of their lives. And in the Book of Acts we read about how the miracles which Jesus describes here—speaking in other languages, picking up deadly serpents, surviving hurtful poisons, healing the sick—all actually happened during that apostolic age when our Lord’s Gospel was first proclaimed. In such miraculous ways, the One who sits “at the right hand of God” confirmed the Word of the Gospel which His apostles preached.

We are His waiting Church. We look forward to His glorious return of which the angel spoke. And as we wait, we have been given the same assignment—the same “Great Commission”—which He gave to His disciples on that day of His ascension. To us, too, He says, “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to (all people).” Also to us He has entrusted that washing of rebirth of which He promises here, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” Also to us He has given the holy Supper of His body and His blood which, as St. Paul says, continues to proclaim His redemptive death until He returns. And on this Ascension Sunday, we especially call to mind that He has not left us to carry out our work by ourselves. “He sat down at the right hand of God,” St. Mark tells us. The exalted Christ has taken up the full use of His divine power, to fill all things and to rule all things for the good of His Church. As we work to carry out His command, He is present with us—to guide us, to hear our prayers, to bless our efforts according to His gracious will. That is the sure hope we have in our mission for Him—the faith and confidence with which we are blessed on this Ascension Sunday.

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