

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Ascension – May 9, 2024
Luke 24:44-53 – Ascended for Our Blessing
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and Christ our risen and ascended Lord! Amen.

Listen again to the final words of the gospel of Luke: “Then [Jesus] led them 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. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.”

The ascension of our Lord into heaven is a blessing. A blessing to the apostles, a blessing to the disciples, a blessing to you. So as Christ was ascending into heaven, he lifted up his hands in a blessing. And the apostles returned from the Mount of Olives, not with mourning or sadness, not as from a bitter farewell, as if their Lord were gone forever, but with great joy.

And they were in the temple worshipping Jesus and blessing him, because they knew their risen Lord was ascended into heaven and sitting at the right hand of the Father for them, so he might always be with them. With them in the church, in his temple. Just as he promised. “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” I am with you always. With you in my word and sacrament, in baptism and absolution and the supper, in my means of grace. Not just with you spiritually, but truly with you in my body and blood, for your comfort.

This blessing is the foundation of everything we believe about the church and prayer and the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper. Our Lord is truly with us.

Therefore, the Formula of Concord, an authoritative document of the Lutheran Church which all Lutheran pastors swear to uphold, the Formula of Concord Article VIII clearly confesses the true doctrine of the person of Christ. Listen to the words of our Confessions, explaining why our Lord's ascension into heaven is a joyous comfort and blessing for Christians.

“We believe, teach, and confess,” says the Formula, “That it was not a mere man who suffered, died, was buried, descended to hell, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and was raised to God's majesty and almighty power for us. But it was a man whose human nature has such a profound, indescribable union and communion with God's Son that it is one person with Him.”

In other words, Jesus is perfect God and perfect man. This is what 1 Corinthians 2:8 teaches when it says, “They crucified the Lord of glory.” Who died on the cross? The Lord of glory, God himself. Acts 20:28 says the same, that with God's blood we have been redeemed. God's blood paid for our sins.

But then when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, our God-man didn't lay aside his humanity. The man, Jesus, perfectly united with God the Son, is sitting in majesty on his heavenly throne, right now today.

So the Formula continues: “After His resurrection, Christ entirely laid aside the form of a servant, but not the human nature... In this way He entered into His glory. So now not just as God, but also as man He knows all things and can do all things. He is present with all creatures, and has under His feet and in His hands everything that is in heaven and on earth and under the earth, as He Himself testifies in Matthew 28:18, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.’ And St. Paul says in Ephesians 4:10, ‘He ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.’ Because He is present, He can exercise His power everywhere. To Him everything is possible and everything is known. [This means] Christ may give His true body and blood in the Holy Supper, as one who is present – and it is very easy for Him to do so. He does not do this according to the mode or ability of the human nature, but according to the mode and ability of God's right hand.”

The Formula of Concord goes on to explain that the right hand of God is not some set place in heaven. It's not like Jesus ascended and now he's stuck up there, until he comes again. No, Christ is not imprisoned in heaven. That would be the false teaching of the Calvinists. Calvinists say Jesus as a man cannot be present everywhere in his body and blood. They say the Lord's Supper is only a spiritual eating and drinking, not a true eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ, because a human being cannot be present everywhere. “This is my body,” according to them, is only figurative speech.

How awful! If the Calvinists are right, then Jesus is a liar and his words of institution are lies. It's not his true body and blood, it's merely a symbol, empty of any real comfort. If they're right, the Lord's Supper has no

power to give you forgiveness and life. But thanks be to God, his right hand is not a place somewhere up in heaven, out of reach and out of touch. The right hand of God describes his almighty power, which fills heaven and earth. So when Jesus sat down at the right hand of the Father, he received all God's almighty power.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." With these words, Jesus is telling us, "In me, God and man are perfectly united. As a man, I sit at God's right hand, holding the power of God. In me the whole fullness of the Deity dwells bodily. This is the great mystery, so great that even the angels have their delight and joy in looking into it."

As God, our ascended Lord is almighty, eternal, infinite, everywhere present at the same time, and all-knowing. Meanwhile, as man, he is flesh and blood, finite and located in one place. He suffers, dies, ascends, and descends, suffers hunger, thirst, cold, and heat.

But the whole Christ has all these attributes. The immortal God who cannot die was able to die on a cross. And the man Jesus is omniscient, omnipresent, and eternal. He truly lives and reigns forever as God. He knows all things, he hears our prayers. This man is not tied to any one place, whether in heaven or on earth. He is omnipresent, with us everywhere, as a man, our brother. Best of all, his human body is truly life-giving food, his blood is truly life-giving drink.

So Christ is truly present in his human body and blood in the Supper, just as he promised. His words of institution are no figurative speech, but real and solid. This is truly his body and blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

Today, on Ascension Day, we celebrate that our ascended Lord is present wherever he wants to be, in his human nature. He is especially present, says the Formula, "In His Church and congregation on earth as Mediator, Head, King, and High Priest. This presence is not a part, or only one half of Him. Christ's entire person is present, to which both natures belong, the divine and the human – not only according to His divinity, but also according to, and with, His received human nature. He is our Brother, and we are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone. He has instituted His Holy Supper for the certain assurance and confirmation of this, so that He will be with us, and dwell, work, and be effective in us also according to that nature from which He has flesh and blood."

What a wonderful blessing! We're stuck here on earth, until we die or Christ returns. But Jesus bridges the gap between God and man, heaven and earth. He's not stranded up there like we're stuck down here. He is omnipresent, even in his human body. His body is truly present on every altar, as he promised. Immanuel, God with us, is here. Here to forgive and strengthen us, to serve us, to bring heaven to us on earth.

So rejoice, on this Ascension Day. And worship your God, your High Priest, your King, the man Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of the Father. Never let anyone take away this precious doctrine, that your Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is with you always. That God became a man like you to redeem you. That a man like you has experienced every human suffering and temptation imaginable, and yet remains without sin. And that same man is here, in the church with us, in his sinless body and blood, for us to eat and to drink.

Praise him forever, Jesus Christ, the eternal man who is with us always! Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.