

“Why Are We Celebrating?”

Luke 24:50-53

May 17, 2012

Ascension Day

Why are we here on a Thursday evening in the spring? Why is the Christian church celebrating Ascension Day? This is actually a two part question. Why are we here celebrating? It seems that there is an unofficial rule in many Lutheran Churches that all midweek celebrating ceases after Easter. Outdoor activities and end of school activities attract our attention at this time of year. Attendance at Family Night and midweek services suffers. So, in view of all of that, why are we here *celebrating*?

More importantly, why are we here celebrating *Ascension Day*? The main focus of Ascension Day is Jesus leaving. We don't celebrate people leaving. When your son or daughter goes away to college (especially the first time), you don't rejoice. You probably feel sad. The same is true when a friend goes off to serve in the military or elderly relative goes off to a nursing home. We grieve, rather than celebrate, the absence of a person who has gone.

Yet Jesus told His disciples right before He left them and ascended into heaven, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20) He ascended and yet is with them – a very puzzling turn of events. Jesus is the only one who can leave without ever going away. He can go away without ever leaving.

How do we understand this seeming contradiction? I think many people believe that Jesus is not really here except in some vague spiritual way. It's like when a friend or family member embarks on a long journey. You might say, “I'll be with you in spirit.” Many people think Jesus is with us in the same way – far, far away, but with us “in spirit.”

People live as if that is what they believe. Therefore, there is nothing for them to celebrate. They worship an absent Jesus. They sing to an absent Jesus. They pray to an absent Jesus. They ask for forgiveness from an absent Jesus.

The question becomes, if Jesus is so physically far away and only present in some spiritual way, does your repentance reach Him? Does His forgiveness reach you? Can you bridge the gap? Does your joy in worship, your sincerity in your prayer life, and your sense of spirituality bring you closer to Him?

Jesus is the only one who can leave without ever going away. He can go away without ever leaving. This is a paradox only if you misunderstand the nature of the incarnation. Regardless of your understanding of Jesus' death, His resurrection, His ascension, or His sitting at the right hand of God, it is your understanding of the incarnation that is crucial.

Is your understanding of the incarnation such that you think of Jesus as the Son of God trapped within the confines of a human body? If that's the case, then Jesus' bodily ascension into heaven causes concern. He can't be at point A and point B at the same time. He can't be in heaven and, at the same time, here in our church. To solve this problem logically, you either have to undo the incarnation and say that Jesus is no longer fully human, but only spiritual or you have to concede that Jesus is not truly with us – at least not always.

Yet neither of those is Scriptural. Let me ask you a couple of questions. Was the Son of God with Mary before the incarnation – that is, before she conceived and became pregnant with Jesus? The answer is: of course He was. But after the incarnation, Jesus was not only with her. He was within her.

Is Jesus everywhere in the universe and present with all? The answer is: of course He is. But can He also, in His divinity and in His humanity, be present at a specific place and with someone or with a group of people? That, too, is true.

That means that the Son of God who fills the universe and rules it for the sake of His Church is present in His divinity and in His humanity with His Church within her congregations. He is humanly present right here. He has promised, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20)

Even more than that, He is vocally present among us as well. Those who speak for Him are really Him speaking through them. He has promised, “He who hears you hears me;” (Luke 10:16)

But there’s more. He’s not only here humanly. He’s not only here vocally. He is here in His very body and blood upon our altar this evening in, with, and under the bread and wine according to His promise.

Think what this means. Jesus is the only one who can leave without ever going away. He can go away without ever leaving. The same Jesus who was crucified to win our forgiveness; who was resurrected to give us life; who ascended to gain power and authority over the universe by sitting at the right hand of God – that Jesus is here among us now, spiritually, and physically.

Jesus is here to hear our prayers. We don’t need to bridge the gap by any of our efforts. Jesus is here to audibly speak His forgiveness to us through the human voice He has called and appointed to speak. Jesus is here to give assurance of that forgiveness by giving to us His body which was nailed to a cross to eat and His blood shed on that cross to drink which was then raised from the dead, brought out of the tomb, and ascended into heaven yet, at the same time, is in the bread and wine on our altar.

This explains the attitude and actions of the disciples on that Ascension Day so many years ago. They were not lost and confused. They were not sad or even bittersweet. Jesus is the only one who can leave without ever going away. He can go away without ever leaving. The disciples experienced great joy. It was not dependent on their circumstances which had not been good and were going to get worse. Their joy was the byproduct of the presence of the Lord. Therefore, they were together all the time – winter, spring, summer, or fall – worshipping God in the temple in joyful celebration and anticipation. They knew Jesus had left but was not gone. He was gone, but had not left. They knew Jesus was among them. His gifts were among them. He was there spiritually and physically; as the Son of God and the Son of Man.

We know and experience the same today. Jesus is among us as we gather together in His name. Jesus speaks to us audibly today in the reading & preaching of His Word and the speaking of forgiveness. Jesus is bodily present among us in His true body and in His true body given for us Christians to eat and drink and become in union with Him. What joy is ours now! What excitement awaits us in the future. Jesus is the only one who can leave without ever going away. He can go away without ever leaving. And THAT, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is the reason we gather here on a spring evening in the middle of the week to celebrate Ascension Day! Amen.