

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed, Alleluia!

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

My dear beloved flock, the text for our meditation this morning is the Epistle lesson of Saint Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, chapter one verses fifteen through twenty-three.

Good morning boys and girls. How many four-letter words do you know? I am sure that you know a lot of four-letter words. Know is one, four, word, many, I could go on. There are a lot of four-letter words. No good preacher would ever start a sermon with a four-letter word, much less base the whole sermon around it. But I'm going to anyway. That word? Is h-o-p-e: hope. You might be thinking that doesn't count. Sure, hope has four letters, but we live in a world where talking about hope is a little like burping at the dinner table. It's not respectable to do. Everything is so bad, how can there be real hope? Ponder that question as you hear the rest of the sermon. You may go back to your seats and those who love you.

We need hope.

Many people think that to have hope is to go around life being always happy, cheerful, and optimistic. Hope is not the same as optimism. It is tied not to attitude but to action. The late British Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book *Celebrating Life*, pointed out that optimism is passive while hope is active. We can think about it this way, imagining you are desiring to work out and get into better health. Optimism is having a gym membership. Hope is going jogging every morning.

Despair is the opposite of hope. It leads to inaction, guilt, and fear. We have no motivation to do anything at all, either for ourselves or others. As Luther writes in the Small Catechism, when we pray "lead us not into temptation" we are asking that the Lord would "guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice"

(Lord's Prayer, Sixth Petition).

With hope, we are able to move through the day, the year, through life. Without hope, everything begins to grind to a halt. Where can we find true hope?

Many times, we look for False hope. False hope is no hope at all.

We need hope so desperately that we turn to any false hope that we can find. False hope causes us to live life trusting in a lie rather than the truth. Many cults have fixed an end date for the world, and people have built their lives around hope in something that turned out to be a lie. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses state that the end of the world would be 1923. It is still here today. In 1978, the world was shocked to learn of the mass murder-suicide that took the lives of more than 900 individuals. Under the guidance of the charismatic Reverend Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple murdered a congressman, journalists, and intentionally drank cyanide-laced juice because of the hope that they had in Reverend Jones and his false preaching. Many people sold their possessions and homes in 1999 because they believe the world would end at the very first stroke of the year 2000. False hope has a great cost. It can lead to bitterness, disillusion, bad living, rebellion against God because He is working according to His timetable, not our own. In short, false hope leads to despair and unholiness.

Why all this talk about hope? Because Paul ties real hope to Jesus, and specifically to his ascension. Because God has raised Jesus "from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." We have a real hope for our own future.

Real hope is found in Christ's ascension. Real hope is found seated at the Right hand of the Father.

Saint Paul prays that the “eyes of the hearts” of the Ephesians will be opened to understand the hope to which they have been called. This is the crux of the matter. When the work of God through the Son by the Spirit is happening, to be enlightened by the Spirit is to see a certain hope, to expect a specific future outcome for the world and for ourselves. This hope is a glorious *kleronomia*, “inheritance,” a possession not earned but received by relationship with another, in this case Jesus Christ. Our *elpis*, or “hope,” is in receiving the *kleronomia* that is already ours on account of the work of Jesus.

We have Hope because of Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus has paid the price for our sins, by His suffering and death. Jesus ascends to heaven, still bearing the marks of His atonement for us. Jesus is not gone. Just because we cannot see Him does not mean that He has abandoned us. Rather, He has been promoted and is taking us with Him. When senior staff persons or politicians take new, higher positions, they often take their trusted staff with them. Such is the case with us. Christ is the Head, and we are members of the Body, the Church. If all things are under his feet, it means they are under ours as well (vv 22–23). Christ has ascended and will return to take us to be with Him forever.

We have hope not because we innately have hope, but because Jesus has called us. He has given us “the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (v 18). It is Jesus who has called us to sainthood by the will of the Father, and it is by the Spirit that we are given this wisdom and knowledge. This is the Good News: by Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension our sins are forgiven, and we inherit a portion of his riches by grace. Heaven is ours because of Jesus.

It is true, we do not walk, talk, and eat with Jesus as the early disciples did. But if Jesus had not ascended, imagine the fighting among Christians for a seat next to him! Because he is ascended, he is with us all, and we can live

lives of hope of being in his presence forever.

We have true hope.

Our world is awash in hopelessness. We hear a message of hopelessness every day. “The climate is changing, our cities will be flooded, and our coasts destroyed by waves of hurricanes.” “Viruses will take away our freedoms and lives.” “Faith in institutions is collapsing and people are turning ever increasingly to violence to solve their problems.” The market for hope is wide open.

Many are in the business of selling false hopes. We hear false hopes proclaimed every day as well: “This pill will help you live longer.” “This drug will take all your aches and pains away.” “This item will help you get the hot man or woman.” “This stock will make you rich.” “This party or person will save the country.” “This prayer will make everything all right.” Wolves in sheep’s clothing are all around us, attacking us, tempting us, leading us away into false hope and despair.

Jesus’ ascension gives us real hope. You know there is a God and that He cared enough for you to send his Son to redeem you. His Son was crucified, died for you, and has ascended to rule over all things and be with us always as He promised (Mt 28:20). *Ascension* doesn’t mean “gone.” It means present in all the places He said He’d be and has promised to be: in His Word, in His Sacraments, among His people. That is our hope.

There are many great festivals in the church year. We all love Christmas, celebrating the baby Jesus, the manger, the angels and shepherds. Easter has its lilies and empty tomb and bewildered disciples. Pentecost pushes us out into the world to be the Body of Christ. Ascension is unique, in that its central message is hope. It centers our faith, strengthens us for what lies ahead, and gives us the promise of a better future.

Christ Ascended to Ensure Us of Our Eternal Place with Him.

As the great hymn says, God “has raised our human nature On the clouds

to God's right hand; There we sit in heav'nly places, There with Him in glory stand. Jesus reigns, adored by angels; Man with God is on the throne. By our mighty Lord's ascension, We by faith behold our own" (*LSB* 494:5). That is our hope. Amen.