

The Ascension of Our Lord
St. Luke 24:44-53

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. And they worshiped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God.”

After going before His disciples into Galilee (cf. Matthew 26:32; 28:7), and appearing to many, many people, giving them many infallible proofs of His resurrection (cf. Acts 1:3), Jesus led His disciples through Jerusalem to Bethany to be received into heaven there before them. Christ’s ascension did not happen in Galilee, which served as something of their home base during His three-year ministry, but just outside of Jerusalem. They had been there a mere 40 days previous where they had witnessed His passion, suffering, and death, and where He had risen from the dead.

In fact, to get through Jerusalem to Bethany, they had to pass through the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane. So, there they all were again, the place of Jesus’ capture and torture and death on their behalf, and it is at this place where Jesus, as He had said so many times before, would be taken from them.

Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you...when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.

(John 16:7, 13-14)

Being there served as a visual reminder of what the Father had sent the Son to do. God suffered and died on their behalf, fulfilling His Law, keeping every statute and fulfilling the punishment it demands for their failure to do so—and you, dear hearers—and the place where they stood and witnessed His ascension was where His bloody, sweaty agony had started.

And as if to nail home this reality, pun intended, Jesus blessed them. There were typically two ways to confer a blessing. Individually, you touched the person you were blessing, usually on the head, as you receive from your pastor when receiving individual absolution. When blessing a group, you raise your arms over your head and pronounce the blessing with palms facing the crowd. Jesus had brought His disciples to the place where He shed blood and sweat for them, then showed them His nail-pierced hands in blessing before being taken from them into heaven. The content of the blessing is unknown—it is not know what Jesus said—but what greater blessing can there than one that includes being shown the wounds and stripes by which they were healed?

From there, “He...ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.” (Ephesians 4:10) Have you ever given any thought as to why Jesus ascended?

For one thing, He said that He must leave in order to send the Holy Spirit. You heard accounts of Jesus telling His disciples this very thing the past couple of Sundays. Furthermore, Jesus told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they received power from on high, as He had previously told them. (cf. Acts 1:4-5, 8) At that time, 10 days later, the Holy Spirit descended upon them, and they began to proclaim Christ crucified gathered for the nations gathered in the city for the Feast of Booths. The Holy Spirit took from what is from Jesus and made it clear to them, and they made it clear to those gathered in Jerusalem.

For another thing, Jesus ascended so that the Church could operate on faith and not on sight. Think of it this way, had Jesus remained on earth like in the days following the resurrection, it would have been a great thing. People could see Him, talk to Him, know Him, and know the things He had

done for them. His death on their behalf would have been confirmed by being over 2000 years old and still bearing the stripes that brought salvation and healing to mankind. It would be marvelous for the church, and potentially give no excuse for anyone to believe in anything else or in nothing at all. But, let's say that Jesus remained in Jerusalem or Galilee; could you say that He would be here tonight because two or three or more are gathered here in His name? He said that would happen, so it would behoove you to trust that He would be, but He certainly would not be here like He is there in Jerusalem or Galilee, where you could see His nail-pierced hands as He blessed you.

He is filling that space in Jerusalem or Galilee locally. His presence is visually verifiable. Here, you only have His Word on it, and that should be enough, but His presence there could cause doubt here and anywhere else where He would not be visually present. Therefore, He ascended far above the heavens to fill all things. How does He fill all things? The Spirit takes from what is His and makes it known to you. You know of Jesus by the means He has left for you—the Word and Sacraments. The Holy Spirit is at work through these means to fill you with Jesus, so that you who are Baptized into Christ have put Him on, and that it is no longer you who live but Christ who lives in you. (cf. Galatians 2:20; 3:27)

And He has ascended far above the heavens to prepare a place for you, that where He is you may be, too. (cf. John 14:3) Make no mistake about it, eternity is not some ethereal plane of existence where you one day will ascend spiritually. There is an actual place being prepared for you, you will have an actual seat at the banquet feast of the Lamb in His kingdom that has no end in His eternal presence. Jesus ascended bodily to heaven. He who descended down here below and took on flesh and bone and blood like yours, now has taken that flesh and bone and blood to the right hand of the throne of God.

"And He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead..." On that last day, Jesus will return in the same way the disciples saw Him depart: on the clouds, in the flesh. Then, you will be like Him and in the place where He is, glorified, perfected, and ultimately restored. The Son is glorified in His death, resurrection, and ascension for you, and you are glorified with Him by way of your Baptism into His death, resurrection, and ascension. By way of this Baptism, you have put on Christ, and you are called children of God. Now, on the last day, when Jesus returns bodily to judge the living and the dead, you will be judged living, because you are the glory of the Son.

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. (1 John 3:1-2)

There sits Jesus, ascended to the throne on high, filling all things, and there for you, your Prophet, Priest, and King. He intercedes for you, His brothers, before His Father (and your Father) in heaven. Yet another amazing thing to ponder. God intercedes with Himself on your behalf, but not merely as God, but as God-in-the-flesh, Jesus Christ. Let no one ever say that God does not or cannot fully comprehend the suffering of mankind. The Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief, sits at the right hand of the throne of God, the place that is rightfully His by way of being God Himself. And if you have difficulty coming to grasp with that idea, see Him at Bethany, blessing the disciples, His hands raised in blessing, showing them once again the nail prints, as He is taken from their sight on the clouds to heaven.

For now, Jesus acts as your Prophet by sending messengers to you to bless in like fashion, perhaps not with nail prints in their raised hands, but with words which express the truth of which those nail prints have won for you, as well as the thorn-pricked brow, flagellated back, and pierced side: [raise hands in blessing] you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.