



Easter 6

May 21, 2017 - 10:15 a.m.

Rev. Todd Goldschmidt, Pastor

**Theme: Christ Is Truly Present In Word
and Sacrament!**

Sermon Text: Luke 24:44-53 (NIV)

⁴⁴He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.⁴⁶He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

⁵⁰When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵²Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³And they stayed continually at the temple praising God.

Sunday Worship Service: 10:15 A.M. (Sunday School/Adult Bible Study 9 am)

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Christ has completed His earthly ministry. He's taken up in a cloud and carried up into the sky. He is no longer physically present with His followers. There's an air of finality about His ascension. It's different than Jesus' vanishing from sight while at the home of the disciples in Emmaus. It declares that we—the members of His Holy Christian Church—can expect to see Him now only through the eyes of faith.

But it isn't the end of the story, where things are wrapped up neatly or left trailing with, "And they lived happily ever after." No, the ascension is the close of one chapter and the beginning of another. And this new chapter is where you and I are introduced into the story, for this chapter is the account of the ongoing life of the Church, which lives in the witness and worship of Christ, who suffered and died, and on the third day rose again from the dead. Forty days later, He ascended into heaven and since that day sits at the right hand of the Father in the position of honor and glory that He had since before the dawn of earthly time and space. This is the chapter we live in, and, as for the disciples after the ascension, it's a cause for great joy. When Christ returns, we'll have the ultimate "happily ever after" at His side in heaven! Yet even that won't be "The End." It'll be the start of our blessed eternity! What a rosy future you and I have to look forward to friends!

For four days in October, 1529, the reformers Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli met at Castle Marburg in Germany in an effort to bring about theological unity to a fledgling Protestantism. They seemingly agreed on almost everything, except on what we call the "real presence" of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. Zwingli—employing human reason—insisted that the Lord's Supper was only a symbolic remembrance of Christ's death. Luther—holding fast to God's Word—maintained that Christ gave His body and blood for us Christians to eat and drink so that through penitent reception of both, we could be assured of God's forgiveness. At the heart of the dispute—a dispute that remains today—is the understanding of who Christ is and what His ascension into heaven means for us.

For forty days after His resurrection, the risen Lord Jesus met with His disciples—that is, the Eleven minus Judas along with those who were gathered together with them—in order to bring a unity of witness of the fledgling New Testament church. He speaks His peace upon them. He displays His pierced hands, feet and side, inviting them to touch Him and see that He is really present and not a mere spirit. He eats a piece of broiled fish before them. And He teaches them, showing them how everything in the Scriptures—from Moses through Malachi—was written about Him and the fulfillment of His mission to die for them and rise to life again. Jesus taught them nothing new. In fact, Jesus says, "This is what I told you while I was still with you." Wait. Isn't Jesus with them during these moments, too, as He calms their fears, eats with them and teaches them? Of course! But He's with them in a new way. Before, Jesus walked among them in humility, His divine nature hidden. Now He is exalted, having been raised by the Father. No longer does He refer to Himself as the Son of Man. No Jesus openly calls Himself Christ.

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As the exalted Christ, His visible presence becomes an exceptional presence. Just as He kindly spoke to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, Jesus must ascend to the Father's right hand.

And so that's what He now does: "When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven." But now doesn't that put Him far away and out of reach? In our First Lesson from Acts chapter 1, it says that the disciples stood gazing up into the sky as they saw Jesus go away. We can picture them straining to see Him, much like we do when our child lets go of a balloon they thought they were holding on to tightly. It flies up into the sky and drifts away on the breeze until it eventually disappears out of sight. They were wondering to themselves what they were going to do now that they would no longer be able to see Him, touch Him, watch Him perform miraculous acts of kindness and listen to His words of heavenly wisdom. Aren't the disciples being abandoned by Jesus, just like they abandoned Him on Good Friday? Was this karma, after all, for their inability to stand by Him when He needed them most?

Aren't we a lot like those disciples on the day Christ ascended back into heaven? We have plenty of times when we wish Jesus wasn't so distant, so far away from us—especially when our faith is being tested by any number of temptations and trials, be they physical, spiritual or emotional. A family member is stricken with an incurable disease, and we wonder where Jesus is. We lose our job—a job we'd worked at long and hard for many years—and we think to ourselves, "Where's God in this?" A child or a grandchild starts running with the wrong crowd, perhaps abusing drugs or alcohol, and hasn't seen the inside of the church sanctuary for longer than we care to remember. A marriage ends in a bitter divorce, or a long-term relationship screeches to an abrupt halt when we discover that our significant other has been visiting online dating sites for singles. A pet sin keeps rearing its ugly head, and we find it next to impossible to beat it into submission. The list could go on and on. What then? Where's Jesus when we need Him most?

Let's go back to Luther and Zwingli for a moment. Zwingli saw the ascension as Christ escape from the earth to be seated at the Father's right hand—God's right hand being a place at the edge of the created universe, in his opinion. For Zwingli, Jesus went far away and He'll come back on the Last Day to judge the living and the dead. On the other hand, Luther trusted in Christ's words: "Surely I am with you **always, to the end of the age**" (Matt. 28:20). He grasped that Jesus has established a new way in which He visits and redeems His people. During the course of the Marburg debate, Luther came to realize that Zwingli was of a different spirit than the Holy Spirit in this regard, especially. The Scriptures can only be spiritually understood, and this is something that only God can do for fallen sinners like you and me. Zwingli rejected this working of God's Spirit and leaned on his own understanding. Luther received the proper understanding, blessed by God to have his "mind and heart [opened] to understand the Scriptures and to listen to the word" according to the **Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord (II 26)**.



Listen to the Word, and have your minds and hearts opened by God's Spirit to understand the Scriptures today. Jesus hasn't abandoned us by His ascension. On the contrary, He continues to be actively present with His people by new means. In the Lutheran church we call these means, "The Means of Grace." Today,

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By His ascension, Jesus is "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (1:21-23) as the Apostle Paul reminded the Ephesian believers. In His ascension, the Crucified and Risen One has risen even higher! Christ sits on His holy throne as the great King over all creation (Psalm 47), bestowing the blessings of His death and resurrection upon us, distributing His sacrificial gifts to His people through the gospel in Word and Sacrament. These gifts are not merely symbols or simple remembrances of what He accomplished in behalf of mankind. They are the means by which Christ continues to give Himself to us and shower us with His forgiving grace, new life and the sure and certain hope of heaven itself! These means rest upon Christ's own name and reputation. They are the basis of everything that the name of Christ represents: His revelation, chiefly in the cross and empty tomb. Resting upon Christ's name, these gifts have His divine authority and power, right and might to accomplish that for God expressly purposed them!

Repentance and forgiveness of sins is accomplished first through the preaching of the gospel: that "The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day." This gospel message creates saving faith where there is none and strengthens believers in our resolve to keep putting our hope and trust in Jesus. We are joined to this very same crucifixion and resurrection in the waters of Holy Baptism—a baptism in which we live as God's holy people, "living stones" (1 Peter 2:5) "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20). When the Pastor speaks the words of Absolution over us, he makes the sign of the cross, assuring repentant sinners that we are completely pardoned. When we come forward to the Lord's Table, Jesus feeds us with His very body and blood, given and shed for us. Confident of our own forgiveness, we forgive those who sin against us with the same mercy, as we pray every Sunday, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." And our fellow believer receives Jesus' pardon from us in the words we speak in His name.

When we're hurting, in need or simply at our wits end when it comes to which way is up wouldn't we like to see Jesus with our own eyes? Sure. That's how the disciples felt when they saw Jesus ascended into heaven. But know that in His Word, in absolution, in baptism and in His Supper Jesus is with us by His Spirit as much as if He was physically present. "Blessed are we who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29) Jesus said. And so we are blessed in Jesus' name! Amen.

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