

The Ascension of Our Lord
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Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Acts 1:1-11 – Ascension

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

This time of year we find many reasons to celebrate. Today, we celebrate Mother’s Day and thank God for our mother’s love and all she does for her children. Then in about a month it will be Father’s day. But, in between, at this time of year, there are also confirmations, graduations, and weddings. Sometimes we have more than one reason to celebrate at the same time. Maybe we combine a birthday with a graduation or an anniversary with a Father’s day. These are just some of the special events we celebrate.

How many of you have a celebration planned for this coming Thursday? After all, it marks the anniversary of one of the major festivals in our church year. This is a festival which unfortunately many times gets overlooked and is underappreciated. This Thursday will be the fortieth day after Easter - the ascension of our Lord. If you do not have a celebration planned that is okay because we are celebrating it today. My prayer is we recognize why we have many reasons to celebrate Jesus’ return to heaven.

We may not think of the departure of a leader or a great ruler leaving followers behind as a time to celebrate. Those that remember when President Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963 probably don’t recall it as a celebration. It is remembered as one of the bleakest and blackest days in our country. Our nation was filled with sorrow and sadness. Or think of how Socrates, when he was drinking the poisonous hemlock, tried in vain to banish the despair of his followers which he was leaving behind. But, dear friends, Jesus’ departure is much, much different! He leaves in victory. Jesus doesn’t leave this earth with us sighing: “*Oh, there is so much more He could have done!*” He leaves as a conquering hero and risen Savior. Christ’s

ascension means joy and triumph for His disciples. So today, as we gather together, we will: **Celebrate our Lord's Ascension. Celebrate His completed work. Celebrate His commissioning command. Celebrate His coming again.**

Here in Acts, Luke gives us the fullest description of Jesus' ascension. Luke starts by referring to his former book, his Gospel, where he wrote about all ***"Jesus began to do and to teach."*** This is significant because without the knowledge of what Jesus did and taught, without the knowledge of what Luke writes in the Gospel, we would not know why Ascension Day is cause for a celebration.

Think back for a moment to some of the things Jesus did and taught, which are recorded for us in Luke's gospel. Are you turning to Luke chapter two, the Christmas story? Is your mind going over the familiar, but always beautiful, essential, and exciting account of Jesus' incarnation? How God became man, being born of a virgin! How the angels proclaim: ***"A Savior is born!"*** Are you turning back to Jesus, the young boy, in the temple or Jesus, the young man, resisting the devil's temptations in the wilderness? Are you picturing Jesus calling His first disciples, performing great miracles, healing, teaching, telling parables? Are you picturing Jesus praying, taking babies into his arms and blessing them, or riding into Jerusalem on a donkey? Are you considering Jesus with His disciples in the upper room giving them His Holy Supper, or later sweating drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane? Are you going back to Jesus' being arrested and placed on trial even though He had done nothing wrong? Are you picturing Jesus' suffering and dying as He is nailed to a wooden cross? Are you seeing Him go willingly to die for your sins and mine? Are you picturing the Lord's lifeless body laid in tomb? Are you turning to Luke's account of Easter morning, where sorrow is turned to joy, defeat to victory, death to life?

This resurrection is now Luke's emphasis as He writes this new book called Acts, a book filled with acts of the disciples taking this good news of the resurrection into the world. But before they did this Jesus spent time ***"showing himself to these men and giving many convincing proofs he is alive."*** Jesus didn't want there to be any doubts that He had completed the task His Father had given to Him. He conquered sin, death, and hell as proved by His resurrection. That's why He spent the extra time He did as ***"He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God to them."*** Jesus makes sure the world He leaves understands He is alive and His work here on earth is all complete. Ascension is a celebration that nothing was left undone when it comes to our salvation.

The disciples actually rejoiced when Jesus left them because Jesus returned to heaven as their victorious Savior. Jesus also gave His disciples work to do – a purpose for their lives here on earth. He tells them to go to Jerusalem & there in a few days (10 to be exact) they will receive the ***"gift my Father promised, which you heard me speak about."*** This gift that came on Pentecost was a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit who gave the disciples power to speak God's Word in other languages and to speak it boldly. Their work on that day had just begun. What work does Jesus have for His followers? ***"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*** Certainly, these disciples were witnesses unlike any other. They had walked with Jesus and learned at His side. The Holy Spirit, the Counselor, even carried some of these men to write down word for word God's Word. They are witnesses to the world for all time. By their witness we, on the ends of the earth, know what Jesus did and taught.

While we are not first hand witness, while we didn't get to walk this earth with Jesus or write down His inspired Word, Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching His Word still applies to you and me today. Jesus ascended into heaven to carry out the same promise He made to His disciples – the promise He will be with us always as we carry out the work of being His witnesses. What does it take to witness? Think of most witnesses in court. They aren't always trained professionals, doctors, rocket scientists or experts. They are regular people called to testify to what they know. They are called to tell the truth about what they have seen and heard.

In the same way, we are witnesses sent to testify to what we know to be true by faith and what we know is awesome! For we know the good news of what Jesus did to save sinners. We know the good news of how Jesus destroyed the devil's work and defeated death forever. Today is a day to celebrate the commissioning command of our ascended Lord. Celebrate the fact Jesus sends us into the world with the gospel to be His witnesses.

After telling the disciples they will be His witnesses, ***“He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.”*** Unlike the times in those forty days when Jesus quickly appeared and disappeared, this time Jesus is not suddenly snatched away from their sight. Now His leaving has a different meaning. Jesus is returning to the right hand of His Father, a place of all power. Jesus is returning to his rightful place in heavenly glory and the disciples are able to see Him slowly go until a cloud covers Him.

They are left standing and staring. While they are ***“looking intently up into the sky as he was going two men dressed in white stood beside them.”*** These two angels say: ***“Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”*** What a gentle reminder! What a neat way these angels turn the disciples astonishment to a more important thought. The angels ask: ***“Why stand there and gaze? You know Jesus is returning to His Father. You know He will still be with you always to the end of the age. You know Jesus is going to heaven to prepare a place for you. You know this Jesus will return in the same way you have seen him go.”***

Jesus' ascension tells us the same things. Jesus will return visibly as He left visibly. He went to heaven and He will come from heaven. He went bodily and He will return bodily to judge the living and the dead. He left in glory and will return in glory with all the angels with Him. So why stand and stare? Our Savior will come back and take us. So go on with your lives - be His witnesses. Jesus' ascension is a time to celebrate because Jesus is coming again. Don't celebrate by gazing into the sky, but by going about in praise and thanks and obedience and service to our Savior who will come for us.

While this time of year gives us many occasions to celebrate, I pray we always include Jesus' ascension. Dear friends, Hail the day we see Him rise! Celebrate the victory, the eternal victory He won for you. Jesus only left this earth visibly after His work for you was all completed! Jesus only left this earth visibly after making sure His disciples, and that includes us, were equipped with everything needed to be His witnesses. In fact, Jesus only left this earth visibly so He can go to a place where He fills everything so that He is able to be with all of His disciples all the time in every place. Jesus left His disciples visibly knowing it will only be temporary because Jesus will return visibly.

So we celebrate the ascension today, and there is no better way to celebrate than by gathering together around God's Word. We combine two celebrations today as we also celebrate Mother's Day. Thank God for your mom, and thank your mom for her love. And if you are blessed with a mom that taught you and is still teaching you about Jesus thank her for giving to you the greatest love of all. As God's Word in Isaiah and Jesus' ascension remind us: ***"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands"*** (49). Jesus has not left us as orphans. He has not left us at all! Indeed, ascension is a time and reason for celebration! Amen