

## **The Festival of the Ascension**

Acts 1: 1-11; Luke 24:44-53

A Sermon for the Festival of the Ascension

On this Sunday which is closest to the Festival of the Ascension (May 9), there is something that is important for us to be aware of and that is that Jesus is present in a different way.

Let's go back and see it from the point of view of those apostles. Remember first of all that there was that enormous defeat because the one that they followed was crucified, and they all fled. Of all things, there was a victory; he arose from the dead!

Then he was among them in a different way. He seemed to be able to go through doors. On the other hand, he could eat fish. He was there, and then he wasn't there. They didn't recognize him when they met him on the road to Emmaus, but then they knew him when he broke the bread (Luke 24:35). And there's the story about going fishing and how they knew him when he took bread and gave it to them (John 21:1-14).

Here at the end of Luke, Jesus is for the last time with his disciples in this new way, yet he going to leave them again. What were they going to do? Remember Thomas, doubting Thomas. In the fourteenth chapter of John, it says: "Look, I'm going to go. I'm going to go to my Father and prepare a place for you." And Thomas says: "Lord, we don't know where you're going, how can we know the way?" "You can't do this to us." It says further in this chapter: "I'm not going to leave you desolate." They were desolate. It's all over, again. He said: "I will come again, not simply at the end." Of course, he is going to come again when everything is rolled up in him. But before that, he's going to come again through the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8).

That raises this problem of what it means to be "spiritual," and who is this Holy Spirit? Commonly we think the Holy Spirit is sort of floating in the air. We think that what is "spiritual" is something that's not real.

How exactly is Jesus Christ present with us now?

We know how the Lord is with us in Baptism, but he also continues to be with us in the Lord's Supper. He's present with us in the bread and the wine, in his word and promises. It's important for us to realize what that's about. We tend to think that's sort of an idea, or that's symbolic, or whatever.

When we point out that he is present truly, really among us, we're concerned about the fact that this is not just invisible. We make a mistake by thinking whatever is visible, that's what real, and then there's the invisible, and who knows what that is.

In contrast to that, when we talk about this, we talk about that which is “hidden” and “revealed.” It’s important to us to use that kind of thinking, rather than “visible” and “invisible.” “Hidden” because God is different from us. But “revealed” because he is truly there in the water, bread, and wine, in his promises.

We can spell this out by looking at a couple of ways people mix this up. At this time of year, we hear about people reenacting battles from the Civil War. They really do it right. They have authentic uniforms, authentic weapons, and they go to the actual place and do it right, except for killing each other.

Is that what we’re doing in the Lord’s Supper? Reenacting? There is a sense in which it is dramatic. We say it’s a meal because that’s after all what the Lord’s Supper is.

Some congregations celebrate the Passover meal that Jewish people call the Seder. When Christians do this, however well-intentioned, it is a mistake. We cannot and do not do it as the Jews do. Many Jewish people don’t like it when we Christians do it because even as we do it respectfully, we’re still playing make-believe. And that is not what we’re doing when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

What are we doing in the Lord’s Supper? We are not play-acting. We do not baptize cats and dogs. Kids might do that. They play-act at almost anything. They play church, play the Lord’s Supper, as they might play a wedding or a funeral, and the like. But let’s remember that that isn’t appropriate. That’s not what it’s about. What we’re doing here is something that is based on God’s promise.

What about infant communion? Why is it that we don’t commune tiny infants? After all, we baptize them. What’s the problem? In the Orthodox Communion (230 million Christians) they not only baptize infants, they commune them at the same time. They also confirm them. All three at the same time. They have an entirely different way of doing these things.

But within Western Christianity, we sort this out by saying there are appropriate ways the Lord works with us. When the child is old enough to know what a meal is, over against eating baby food, then that’s a different thing.

The same thing with confirmation. To confirm a baby who is one month old doesn’t make sense to us for what confirmation is about.

But if it’s all play-acting, then so what? What is it that is decisive about the Lord’s Supper? Four points:

First, we may say that when we come forward to receive the bread and wine, we “gotta” believe. And the answer to that is it doesn’t depend on our believing. When this promise is given, this is truly the Lord’s body and blood. This is what it is in spite of us. Both the one who believes, and the one who doesn’t believe receive the same thing. But for the one it’s a

blessing and for the other it is condemnation. That's why we can sort out the seriousness of what is happening.

It's true that the Lord's Supper strengthens the faith of the one who is already baptized and believing. But the Lord's Supper doesn't depend on us, our thinking, our feeling, our imagination, our believing or anything like that.

Second, Paul does write that we're supposed to remember, and we're supposed to do this again worthily (1 Cor 11:23), but "worthily" does not mean: "Am I good enough? Am I repentant enough? Am I alert enough?" No, the worthiness is based on saying: "I come because it's the Lord's doing." That's entirely different from the way people think of this.

In the third place, people will say it has to be a pastor doing it, which, of course, is true in the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions. In 2003 Pope John Paul II put out an encyclical that spoke to the whole question of the Lord's Supper. There it says that it cannot be the Lord's Supper unless there is a true priest and that has to be a priest who is ordained by a bishop in Holy Orders and in communion with the Pope in Rome. It says this not once but twice.

That's why it is inappropriate for us who are not in the Roman Catholic Church to go to a Roman Catholic Mass. When one does that, one is not only saying: "Yes this is God's presence, but I am also accepting the basic priesthood as it is in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. I'm accepting the Pope in Rome." It is bluntly stated and has the authority of almost infallibility.

Remember that in the US Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue in this country the Lutheran and Catholic scholars refrain from celebrating communion together because they know that to do that means not only accepting the real presence of Christ, which Lutherans of course do, but also accepting the Roman priesthood and the Pope in Rome.

The understanding we Lutherans have about the Lord's Supper is that it doesn't depend on the minister. This problem is not new; it was sorted out in the early church. They had the problem that there were persecutions and in those persecutions many of the laypeople and the priests caved in. When the sword was put to their throats, they said: "Of course, I'll give up Christianity and bow to the emperor."

But when the persecution was over, they said: "We didn't really mean it. We had our fingers crossed. We want to repent." The church asked: "How can somebody who betrayed our Lord this way, be somebody who celebrates communion?" That can't be a real communion. And the answer of the church has been: "It does not depend on the one doing it." The minister can be a rascal or even an unbeliever. It doesn't depend on the one who's doing it. It depends on the promise, the word of God.

Then in the fourth place, what if we don't do it right? What if we drop something on the floor? Or what if we don't say the words right? What if the pastor says it wrong or mumbles? Does that make a difference? When does it happen?

If you go to a Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church, you'll hear a bell ring and that's "the moment." What is it? When does it happen? All of these are questions we say don't matter because of the promise and because it happens in the whole worship service. After all, the proclaimed word (preaching) and the word as it happens in the Lord's Supper (sacraments) is the same. It's in the doing of it, and it's also not dependent on whether we do it right. The Lord smiles at his little children who don't always manage so well, and that's what we are. It doesn't depend on: "Did you do it just right?" Rather, his promise is his promise, and his promise never fails.

As we celebrate the fact that he continues to be with us, between his Ascension and his coming again at the end, our burdens are lifted, our loads are lightened, as Psalm 47, the Psalm for today, says (paraphrase): Clap your hands, shout to God with loud songs of joy because the victory is his, and we are in him, and therefore the victory is ours as well.

Whatever it is that we need, forgiveness, health, comfort, whatever we need, he is here giving that because he is Lord, and everything is in his hands. Amen