

**+ Luke 24:44-53 + Share the Victory of Our Ascended Lord! +
+ Seventh Sunday of Easter: Ascension of Our Lord + 16 May 2010 +**

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

How bittersweet it could have been. On Easter evening, the disciples were sure they had lost Jesus forever to death, but Jesus appeared in their midst very much alive. Oh, they were terrified at the time, but his appearance changed everything. Over the next forty days, Jesus appeared to them to teach and prepare and remind them of what they had seen and hear from him. It was a great time to be a disciple of Christ. There weren't crowds clamoring for his help. Instead they could sit and learn at the feet of their living Lord, but that time had to come to an end.

Forty days after that shocking Easter evening, Jesus took his disciples to a hill outside of Jerusalem, gave his last promises, raised his hands in blessing, and ascended into the sky. Soon a cloud covered him and they couldn't see him anymore. Oh, they gazed into the sky hoping beyond hope that he would suddenly appear among them once again, but it wasn't meant to be. In fact, they stared so intently into the sky that two angels had to tell them, ***"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."*** Their eyes turned to the angels and their expectations returned to earth.

Now their beloved Lord and Teacher and Friend was gone. Oh, they could talk to him in prayer as God himself, but they wouldn't see him along the roads or eating with them. We wouldn't blame them if they had moped back to Jerusalem with their heads down and empty longing in their hearts. We often feel that way when a loved one departs, but Luke tells us that ***"they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy."***

Now why did they do that? Why do you and I rejoice so much at our Lord's ascension, when such a departure might lead to our own tears? We go back to Easter evening once more to discover the answers, which then lead us to **SHARE THE VICTORY OF OUR ASCENDED LORD.**

That night was filled with emotion. One moment the disciples were languishing in guilt, crushed with sorrow, and restlessly watching with the fearful dread of impending doom. The next moment they were terrified at the sight of their once-dead Teacher. The very next moment he was eating broiled fish in their midst. The sorrow and guilt and dread were quickly slipping away, but they still didn't get it...until Jesus spoke.

"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." "Come on, brothers! Don't you remember what I told you just a few days ago, let alone over the past three years? Remember how I told you that the Son of Man would be betrayed and suffer and die and on the third day rise again even though you always protested the very possibility? Remember what I told you? Everything had to be fulfilled. Long ago Moses wrote about the seed of the woman who would come to crush the serpent's head, but whose heel would feel the serpent's bite. That was about me! He wrote about a lamb sacrificed for the sin of the people. He was pointing to me! Other prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Zechariah wrote of the Servant who would suffer and the lowly King who would come to save. They spoke of me! My ancestor, King David had my cross and empty tomb in mind as he sang Good Friday and Easter hymns 1000 years before I was born. Don't you remember? I told you all this ***'while I was still with you.'***"

The cobwebs still clogged their memories. Confusion covered their faces, so Jesus ***"opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures."*** He cleared their minds with his understanding and filled that opening with what they needed to hear most. ***"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."*** Suddenly lightbulbs went on. Suddenly they discovered it all had to happen just as Jesus had said. He had to suffer. He had to die. He had to rise again from the dead three days later. That discovery changed their lives and ours.

You see, Jesus wants you to remember what you discovered as well. Sometimes you and I are like those disciples. Every year we see and hear what our God has done for us through Jesus, and yet every year we forget. We still languish in guilt. We're still crushed with sorrow. We're still filled with dread for the present or the future. We still let sin and guilt get the better of us. We still get so caught up in ourselves and what we're doing right now and what we want right now that we become spiritually lax. Like wayward sheep, we put ourselves in danger of yawning our way into hell. Then crisis or trouble or difficulty comes into our lives and suddenly we're back with the disciples behind the locked doors guilty, sad, and afraid.

Still our ascended Lord comes through his Gospel and helps us remember what we've discovered over the years. Remember how we watched and prepared for his big arrival? Remember how the words of the prophets and apostles, shepherds and angels led us to celebrate that arrival as God himself took on our human flesh and made his dwelling among us? Remember how we marveled at how the Light of the world shattered the darkness of sin and unbelief with the good news of salvation and free forgiveness? Remember how we briefly glimpsed his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration and followed him down that mountain on the long, difficult journey to a much greater place? Remember how we watched Jesus fight off Satan's attacks in our place and how he resolved to save us even though it would cost him his life? Remember how we learned about repentance and grace and rejection, and then raised our voices with loud hosannas, as the King of kings went forth to die for us? Remember how we saw him suffer betrayal and rejection, ridicule and injustice, and the unimaginable pains of hell as the darkness closed in on the Light of life? In all that, however, did we not see God's love and mercy and forgiveness and grace unwrapped and unbelievable? Did we not come to understand why Good Friday is good even though it's all about a single death? Did we not wait and watch like the disciples, except dealing with our own demons and weaknesses and doubts?

Did not the cries of ***"Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!"*** ring out as we entered a new season of discovery—the season of Easter? Remember what we discovered? On Easter morning, with the disciples we discovered the hope of a living Savior in the empty tomb. We discovered the peace that surpasses all understanding behind locked doors. We discovered the power of the God of grace along the sea shore. We discovered life in the loving, protecting arms of the Good Shepherd. We discovered grace in the One who gave his all for us and comfort in the heaven-sent Helper. If your mind is still a little foggy, fear not! Our living Savior opens our minds to understand his Scriptures. ***"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."***

So what are you going to do with all that you have seen and heard? After all, ***"you are witnesses of these things."*** Now we aren't eyewitnesses of Christ as the apostles were, but we have seen and heard what he has done for us. That means you can't just keep it to yourself because you fear you might say something wrong. You can't just keep it to yourself and hope that someone else will do it. No, Jesus points at you and me and says, ***"You are witnesses of these things."*** You are to testify to what you have seen and heard me do for you. You are to tell people what I did for them and how much I love them. I am sending you as my witnesses!"

Now we could hear that and get timid and keep our discoveries to ourselves, but the Lord has a funny way of motivating us to speak. You see, the more time we spend with him, the more we discover what he has done for us, and the more his love compels us to testify. With his Spirit's help, he opens our minds to understand the Scriptures too. With eyes of faith, we see how Jesus fulfilled all those promises for us and still does today! We see how he takes an infant condemned for hell and transforms that little one by the water and Word of Holy Baptism into a beloved child of God. We taste and touch the precious food of his body and blood with bread and wine in his Holy Supper for the forgiveness of our sins. We hear him declare those sins forgiven through his called servant in the Absolution. We hear his promises to send his Holy Spirit through his Gospel and we see him make good on that promise too. We see how the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins burst forth from Jerusalem to reach us today. We see how they received what the Father promised and so do we as we share the victory of our ascended Lord!

So celebrate this Festival of the Ascension of our Lord with great joy! As you see the nail-scarred hands of your Savior lifted in blessing and ascending on high, remember what you discovered this Easter season. Know that your ascended Lord rules and guides all things for your good and the good of his beloved Church. Then go and testify of Christ. It doesn't have to be complicated. It doesn't have to be neat. Simply share what you already know. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Amen.