

**+ Luke 24:44-53 + You Are Witnesses of These Things! +
+ 7th Sunday of Easter: Festival of the Ascension of Our Lord + 24 May 2009 +**

“While [Jesus] was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then [his disciples] worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” Why would the disciples rejoice? It doesn't make sense. We would expect them to be sad. We would expect them to mourn or at least have a good pity party at the loss of their best friend. We would expect them to mope their way back to Jerusalem where they would half-heartedly hang out in the temple courts, but we see no slumped shoulders. We see no tear-streaked cheeks or wet, red eyes. We don't hear the silence of sadness. We don't see them react like the first time Jesus left them. At that time, they ran in fear and hid in sorrow, but this time **“they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.”**

Today is the Festival of the Ascension of our Lord. Today we sing some of the most cheerful, joy-filled hymns this side of Easter's alleluias and the glorias of Christmas, but why do we rejoice? Isn't Ascension a reminder that Jesus isn't visibly with us? Isn't Ascension a reminder that the road ahead is even more challenging, even more difficult, even more hopeless because Jesus isn't visibly here? Isn't Ascension a time for the Church to mourn, when the Paschal Candle that has reminded us of Christ's living presence throughout the Easter season is now snuffed out because he's gone? Isn't Ascension a time to watch the Savior leave this earth while the world grows increasingly hostile to those he left behind, a time for our hearts to ache for Jesus to be here? Yet here today, we sing alleluias and **“Crown him with many crowns”**. Why do the disciples of Jesus then and now rejoice? Our ascended Lord has a reason for all this joy, **YOU ARE WITNESSES OF THESE THINGS** filled with hope and sent forth with a promise.

The frightened disciples had finally started to lose their fear, but they still didn't get it. Our text takes us back to the locked room where the disciples hid during those days right after Good Friday. Reports had come back to them of an empty tomb and a risen Savior, but all those reports were nonsense until the Savior himself appeared in their midst. It still seemed so unbelievable! We're told, **“They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.”** So Jesus sought to take their fears away. He was standing there in the flesh. With fearful hesitation, the disciples had reached out to touch the scars the nails left in his hands and feet and the mark of the spear in his side, but Luke tells us they still didn't get it! **“...They still did not believe it because of joy and amazement...”**

One moment they had been 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 Master and Teacher. The very next moment he was eating a piece of broiled fish in their midst. The sorrow and the guilt and the dread were quickly slipping away, but they still didn't get it...until Jesus spoke 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.” “Come on, guys! Don't you remember what I told you just a few days ago, let alone time and again 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 you learned as children and as you heard from me? Everything had to be fulfilled. Long ago Moses had written 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! Moses had written about a lamb sacrificed for the sin of the people. He was pointing to me! Other prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Zechariah had written about the Servant who would suffer, the LORD Our Righteousness, the lowly King who would come to save. They spoke about me! My ancestor, King David caught a glimpse of Calvary and of my empty tomb 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. You can imagine the confused looks on their faces, so right then Jesus **“opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.”** He cleared their minds with his understanding. Then he filled that opening with what they needed to hear most at that moment. **“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 the lightbulbs went on. It all had to happen just as Holy Scripture had said. Jesus confirmed that for them. He had to suffer. He had to die and he had to rise again from the dead three days later.

There was no other way and they finally got it, but Scripture also foretold a great task that would follow. Repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached in Jesus' name to every nation starting at Jerusalem. Hearts would be changed with the preaching of what Christ had done. That hadn't happened yet, but **“you are witnesses of these things.”** That task would be theirs. They were witnesses of all the promises Jesus had fulfilled. They would be the ones to boldly serve as the proclaimers of that repentance for forgiveness. They would be the ones, who would enter the courtroom of society to testify about the Jesus they knew. Surely a daunting task, but through Scripture Jesus filled their hearts with hope once again.

“You are witnesses of these things.” Sometimes we forget that Jesus was talking to us too. We look around us and lose hope as we, too, enter the courtroom of society. We see hostility continue to grow against those who take the Bible literally and hold to the truth of Scripture, especially when it applies to unborn children and marriage and the end of life. We see the effects of the recession and we see them hamper our congregation’s ability to carry out God’s ministry in spite of a ripe mission field. We see it even more so in our church body as world missionaries are called home, home mission fields are closed, and willing and able candidates for ministry stand waiting in the marketplace without assignments to churches and schools. We hear people around us look forward dismally to a “bleak” future for their children. We start to lose hope and our mouths close shut. We forget that we are ***“witnesses of these things”***, of promises and prophecies fulfilled, of a serpent crushed, of a lamb sacrificed, of a LORD Our Righteousness hanging bloody and battered and appearing so hopeless on a tree, of a King buried in a borrowed tomb, of a Savior glorified, risen and ascended for us.

“You are witnesses of these things.” Remember what you have seen and heard? Yes, we aren’t eyewitnesses of Christ, but we have seen and heard what he has done for us. He didn’t just suffer and die and rise for his disciples. With his Spirit’s help, he opened our hearts and minds to understand the Scriptures too. With eyes of faith, we see how Jesus fulfilled all those promises for us and still does today! Just a few weeks ago, we saw what he did in the miracle of an infant condemned for hell transformed by water and the Word of Holy Baptism into a beloved child of God. We have tasted and touched the precious food of his body and blood with bread and wine in his Holy Supper for the forgiveness of our sins. We heard him speak just moments ago in the Absolution when through his called and appointed servant, Christ proclaimed his forgiveness for you.

Jesus says, ***“You are witnesses of these things”***...and that fills our hearts with hope, but there’s more that gives us hope. There’s more as Christ sends us forth with a promise. You see, he wasn’t about to abandon his disciples to the hopeless hostility of the world around them. No, he gave them reason to rejoice. ***“I 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.”***

What had Jesus promised from his heavenly Father? We go to the words of John 14, ***“All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”*** The disciples had plenty of reason to be filled with hope and joy, even though their Best Friend left their midst once more. God the Father would send his Holy Spirit to provide counsel and wisdom and understanding. As witnesses of the Christ, they were sent forth with a sure promise that the Spirit would remind them of the Savior’s presence in his Word no matter what they faced.

“You are witnesses of these things.” We have hope, because the Father did send his Holy Spirit to his disciples. They burst forth from Jerusalem with that message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and the Lord brought that message to you and me here today. They received what the Father promised. They were clothed with the Spirit’s power from on high...and so are we. ***“You are witnesses of these things.”***

We have seen what the Lord has done, so now is the time for us to enter the courtroom of society to testify to all those promises fulfilled, to testify about a Savior who came in lowliness, but who was exalted on high for us. Through the Word, the Father continues to pour out his Holy Spirit to convert and keep us in him today. Even as we look out around us at the hostility and the financial challenges and the cold hearts and the bleak outlooks, as witnesses of the Christ, we dare not forget about his promises fulfilled and the promises he continues to fulfill, promises that fill us with hope and confidence in our ascended Lord to open our mouths and testify to the truth we know. Through the Word, we can be sure of those promises

“You are witnesses of these things.” You know the reason you can rejoice on this Festival of the Ascension of our Lord. You can see it in the nail-scarred hands lifted in blessing as our Savior is taken up into heaven, not to abandon us, but to rule and guide all things for our good, for the good of us, his beloved Church, as ancient theologian Augustine once said, ***“In eternity Christ will rule among his saints. This God has said. This God has promised. And if that is too small, this God has also sworn.”*** Believe that and celebrate this great festival with great joy looking forward to the day when you, too, will praise our ascended and eternal Lord in heaven. Amen.