

+ Colossians 3:1-4 + Living Hope Focuses on Heaven +
+ Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY +
+ 7th Sunday of Easter: The Ascension of Our Lord + 28 May 2017 +

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!*

Dear Brothers and Sisters looking towards our Ascended Lord,

“Why do you stand here looking into the sky?” Jesus’ disciples had gathered outside Jerusalem and had just seen their Teacher and Friend ascend into heaven. A cloud had hidden him from their sight, but they kept looking, hoping to catch one more glimpse of Jesus, hoping he would come back. Their eyes were fixed on the heavens, but in vain. The Lord had to send two angels to remind the disciples that he had work for them to do here on earth. They couldn’t spend the rest of their lives staring into the skies, because they were to spread the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth. Still the Lord would keep their focus heavenward so they wouldn’t lose sight of heaven or that **“*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.*”**

Two thousand years have passed. None of us have seen Jesus in the flesh nor have many generations before us. For the first disciples, the greatest temptation was to stare into the skies and forget about the work Christ had for them here on earth. For us, however, the greatest temptation is the opposite—to get too focused on this life, this world, and its daily distractions and obligations and responsibilities. We seem to have no time to focus on heaven because our eyes are fixed down here. Unlike the first disciples, we have little sense of urgency that Christ is coming soon. The passing of time has lowered our focus earthward, made us complacent, and perhaps even robbed us of the comfort of Christ’s ascension and return. We need to hear the Apostle Paul speak across the centuries to tell us that **LIVING HOPE FOCUSES ON HEAVEN.**

It’s pretty easy to get distracted in our world. You’re in the middle of a job or errand and you hear the familiar ding of a text message or a social media notification on your mobile device. Or you go to your computer to find an important file or to look up some necessary information online and you end up going down a rabbit hole of sports scores, interesting articles, and e-mail. You have an important assignment to finish, but there’s a great show on TV. You have a project for work to finish, but before the deadline, the kids have practices and games and performances and sleepovers, plus you have grocery shopping, tasks around the house to finish, and things to do at church.

What seems harmless on a daily basis can be dangerous on an eternal basis. We live in a world full of distraction. Satan and our sinful natures want nothing more than to distract us from what is most important—Christ and eternal life with him. Satan doesn’t want us to grow in our faith and understanding in God’s Word. Our sinful natures don’t want us to live as God’s holy children. None of them want the good news of Christ to spread. So they throw distractions at you. You want to spend some time in God’s Word, but there’s work to do and deadlines hanging over your head. God has richly blessed you with family, friends, and stuff, but there’s always something out there that seems better than what you have. As a Christian, you want to do what is pleasing in God’s sight, but how seductive is temptation—so distracting from what’s really important. You want to tell others about Jesus, but there are fears and excuses in the way. Ultimately, Satan wants to distract you into eternal death in hell.

It was no different in Paul’s day. Yes, most of our present distractions weren’t invented yet, but there was still plenty to distract God’s people from what was really important. They lived in a world where Christianity didn’t exist. Many of Paul’s readers had once been pagans. There were plenty of temptations out there for God’s people to turn their backs on Christ and their Christian way of life. They needed their focus shifted heavenward too.

How were they going to keep focused? How can we keep going on the journey to heaven without getting distracted by everything around us? Listen to Paul’s encouragement and hear how truly relevant

it is! ***“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”***

By nature, we are easily distracted by ***“earthly things”***—the countless things, tasks, deadlines, assignments, and temptations of this life. In Christ, however, the focus of our hearts is raised heavenward. We ***“have been raised with Christ”***. Paul explains in Romans 6, ***“Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”***

You see, God loved us too much to let Satan distract us into eternal death in hell. So he sent his Son to save us. Now when Christ, our perfect Savior, came into this world, he never let himself be distracted from carrying out the work God gave him to do, whether as a child at home, a tween in the temple, a teacher with his followers, or as a suffering servant. When Christ went to the cross, he focused on bearing your sins of distraction and all your other sins. He focused on paying the ultimate price for your sins and going through the death and hell you deserved. When he left his tomb empty on Easter, he guaranteed his control over all things and your forgiveness. Centuries later, through the water and Word of Holy Baptism, you died to sin with him. Your sins were crucified and buried with him, and you were raised to new life with him. ***“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”***

Now you personally share in the blessings earned by Christ. Now you are spiritually alive and joined to Christ. So then, ***“set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”*** You have the motivation to live lives in and for Christ. You have the motivation to ***“seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,”*** to seek heavenly things—spiritual treasures like forgiveness and spiritual wisdom and faith and all those fruits that faith produces. Rather than being distracted by the passing things of this world, you can be focused on eternal life in heaven won for you by a holy Savior who loves you more than you can imagine.

That doesn’t mean we forget about the work God gives us through our earthly callings. It doesn’t mean we withdraw from society like so many hermits and monks and nuns, but it does mean that we daily remember that our real citizenship is in heaven. When we understand what Christ has done for us in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, why would we go back to focusing on the useless, changeable things of this life and the sinful distractions that lead only to eternal death in hell? As we’ve seen throughout this Easter season, we have living hope in Christ! That means you can focus your life on your risen Lord. Since Christ has now ascended and rules all things for your good, you can be absolutely sure that your ascended Lord will pour down the blessings you need for this life, while he gives you heavenly treasures.

Knowing that heaven is at the end of our journey gives us the strength and motivation to keep going especially when the journey is difficult and the struggle to be distracted by sin and temptation is fierce. There are just some times, however, when you grow weary on the journey and wonder if the struggle is worth continuing because life is so hard, temptation is so great, distractions are so many, and at every turn it seems like the Church and the gospel are losing and Satan is winning. How quickly we lose hope at such times! It was to weary believers just like us that Paul wrote words that echoed those of the angels when our Lord ascended into heaven. ***“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”*** Christ is going to come back in glory and that gives us hope.

Now how many of us woke up this morning wondering if today would be the day that Christ would return in glory to bring us to be with him in heaven forever? The chances are pretty good that none of us did that, but isn’t that what Paul is encouraging us to do? Yes, the Lord doesn’t tell us the day or hour of his return, but he has promised to come back. That promise is practically the last words of the Bible, ***“Yes, I am coming soon,”*** and that give us living hope!

That gives us living hope when we lay to rest another loved one in the Lord or when the fear of disease or death looms over us. That gives us living hope when the struggle hits close to home, when Satan’s

attacks threaten to tear marriages and families and churches apart. That gives us living hope when the fight seems too fierce and the struggle too long, when we grow weary with trying to live as Christians in a world that hates us and thinks us foolish because we live lives hidden in Christ. That gives us living hope when in our darkest days we wonder if Christ will ever come back. That gives us living hope, unlike the hopeless, "I hope so" hope of our world, because we have the guarantee of the cross, the guarantee of the empty tomb, and the guarantee of Christ's promise to return soon to bring us to be with him, as the hymnwriter put it so eloquently, **"And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph-song, and hearts are brave again and arms are strong."** That distant triumph-song of Christ's eternal victory gives us living hope that keeps us focused on heaven!

"Why do you stand here looking into the sky?" The Lord hasn't called us to stare into the sky and ignore the world around us, but he calls us to keep our hearts focused on heaven and on him because he will certainly come again. So, then, with hearts and minds set on things above, and with eyes and hands and mouths busy with the work he has given us, let us travel on in confident hope that cannot be shaken, no matter what befalls us here on earth. Let us serve as God's people in our God-given callings with an urgency that maybe today is the day on which Christ, our ascended Lord, will return. Let us serve with the living hope of Easter and let's get to work! Christ will be back soon! **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.**

Please stand

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! Amen.