

## Acts 1:8b-11

Someone asked me last week what I was preaching on today. When I replied, “the Ascension,” he responded, “What’s that?” Most people outside the church know that we celebrate Christmas and Easter, but Ascension Day has them puzzled. The greeting card section at Wal-Mart had hundreds of Mother’s Day cards a few weeks ago. There are quite a few graduation cards, even confirmation cards, but nothing in the way of Ascension Day cards. They simply do not make them. There is no market for them. And yet Ascension Day, for us in the church, (which, by the way, was last Thursday-always 40 days after Easter) is a festival which is of extreme importance for us.

The same man who asked me what I was preaching on gave me the rundown of his belief system. Jesus was born, He died, and He rose again. That’s where he stood in what he believed. That was all that mattered. “That’s all well and good,” I told him, “All of these things took place in the past. But where is Jesus now and what is He doing? That’s where Ascension Day comes in,” I continued. “Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter tell us that Jesus was born, that He suffered, died, and rose again. And these had to take place. Yet, Ascension Day tells us that Jesus ascended visibly into heaven so that now He is with us always where His Word and Sacraments are freely given.”

Because of Ascension Day we come to church not just to be informed, but because the Risen Christ promises to be here with us. Because Christ ascended into heaven, when your pastor pronounces the words of Absolution, it is the mouth of Christ speaking the words to you. When your pastor preaches, it is Christ in the pulpit. When your pastor distributes the Sacrament, it is the hand of Christ which is feeding you. And because He ascended, we come up to the altar not just to remember in our minds what Jesus did for us; we come up because the Risen Christ comes to us to give us His true body and blood.

Ascension Day presents a stumbling block to many Christians, and also to our own sinful flesh, because it presents Christ to us not just in the past, but in the present tense. Many people, and even we, like to put ourselves into the driver’s seat when it comes to our faith. Jesus did what He did. But now it’s up to me to take over. We put Jesus only in the past, and ourselves in the present. This is the whole premise behind those bracelets which had WWJD printed on them. “What Would Jesus Do?” He won’t do it, of course (is the thinking). He already did His thing. Now it’s my turn to imitate Jesus and live how Jesus would live if He was in my shoes. But this misses the whole point of what it means to live as a Christian. It’s not that we live how Jesus would live. Rather, because He ascended in order to be with us always, *“it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”*

Ascension Day is a warning to those of us who think that we’re good Christians as long as we have Christ in our memory somewhere. “As long as I know what Jesus did, I’m fine.” But how can any one of us be a Christian if we believe in a Christ in the past, but reject the Christ in the present! Jesus is here now for you and me in His Word and in His Sacraments. If any of us has little use for Jesus who is here now in holy words, holy water, and holy food, the memory of Jesus in our mind will do us no good. Jesus is not a memory. He is a present reality--a living Savior who, because of His ascension, is here for you this very day. This is why the early Christians, and many Christians today, desired Holy Communion each and every Sunday. They did not want a memory of Jesus on Sunday morning. They wanted the real thing! The living Christ present for us in His Sacred Meal.

As Jesus was about to ascend into heaven He told His disciples, “You shall be My witnesses.” And then He added these words, “In Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” These disciples--Jesus’ Apostles--did preach and teach in many places...Jerusalem,

Judea, Samaria. St. Paul traveled throughout Asia Minor and beyond. But they all died before long. And there are remote places through all the earth where they did not go. Yet, Jesus' words are still being fulfilled today. The Apostle John was a witness here in Augusta, Missouri just a few minutes ago as his Gospel of Jesus was read from this lectern. St. Paul's witness also was read here to you from the Book of Acts written by Luke, Paul's secretary. When you talk to your neighbor about what Jesus has done for you, it's not your witness. You and I are not eyewitnesses of all that Jesus did. It's the witness of the apostles that you are giving to your neighbor. So even though the apostles did not travel to the remotest parts of the earth, their witness of Jesus does. And wherever this witness is brought, there is Christ speaking through His apostles. Why? Because of Ascension Day. Where Jesus' death and resurrection is proclaimed, there is the Risen and Ascended Lord.

Jesus ascended for this reason--to be here with you. To forgive your sins, which He does. All of them, because He took all of them to His cross. He is here to bless you with His very life. A life given to you in your baptism and nourished by His flesh and blood. A life which will never die. He is here to live in you and through you. Not just as you sit here in the pew, but day after day out there in the world.

In Jesus' ascension we are reminded that He will come back visibly. Your eyes, and every eye, will see Him, and then He will take us to the mansion He is preparing for us. I went to High School across the state in Concordia, Missouri where there is a Lutheran boarding school. It was about five hours from my home. And I recall traveling those five hours for school breaks with other students all heading home for Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter. We often were cramped in an outdated vehicle. Some of us needed showers, and so we kept the windows cracked for fresh air even in the winter. The roads were long and sometimes a little rough. But none of us really cared--we were going home!

And so today we have our problems. Life isn't always fun. We struggle with this and that. Sometimes we struggle with people. But it doesn't matter--we're going home! You're going home...Jesus says so. You're going home...He died for you and rose again. You're going home...and He is with you now to lead you there. This is why Jesus was born, why He suffered, why He rose again, and why He ascended on high. All these things were for you so that you have a home to go to--so that every day of your life you can say with joy, "Because of Jesus, I'm going home!" Amen.