

Luke 24:44-53

Perhaps you recall a Russian cosmonaut some years ago radioing a message back to earth as he was orbiting high above in his spaceship: "Jesus is not here! That proves there is no God." What was he expecting to see? A man who looked like Jesus, as He is portrayed in paintings and drawings, hovering above the earth with no spacesuit, perhaps surrounded by angels? Apparently this cosmonaut was familiar with the story of Jesus' ascension. As our text tells us, Jesus parted from His disciples as He was blessing them, being lifted up into heaven. That was 2,000 years ago. Does this Russian atheist really believe that Jesus would have nothing better to do than float around in space all this time?

Ascension Day, which is this coming Thursday, was never intended to be a game of Hide and Seek where Jesus floats off somewhere and then leaves it up to us to find Him. Ascension Day may be best explained by water heating in a pot on the stove. We can see the water in the pot, but when the water has boiled for some time, you can no longer see it in the pot. The water is still present in the room, but it has vanished from sight because it has evaporated into the air. Ascension Day is not to be a day of mourning for Christians because "Jesus left us!" He did not leave. He did not go up into orbit for a better view of our lives here on earth. "*I am with you always,*" He promises His church. Jesus is just as much with us preaching, and teaching, and forgiving as He was with His disciples 2,000 years ago. But like steam entering the air, He is no longer visible to our eyes. And so, as the Apostle urges us, "*we walk by faith, not by sight.*"

This morning as we look at our Ascension Day text, we will consider that it means for Jesus, His apostles, and for all of us. For Jesus, Ascension Day was His homecoming. "*I came from the Father,*" He says in today's Gospel reading, "*and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.*" This was a day of triumph! As He entered into heaven, He would have been received with shouts of Alleluias! The angelic chorus would have been singing just as they sang when Jesus was born into the world. Talk about your "ticker-tape parade!" He would have received a welcome ten thousand times more impressive than Superbowl champs riding through the streets of their city.

For His apostles, Jesus' ascension meant that whereas before He was the one going from town to village proclaiming the good news, now He would use them--their mouths to preach and teach, their hands to baptize and give the Lord's Supper, their feet to go into all the world with the Gospel. When Jesus ascended, He wanted the apostles' eyes fastened up watching Him. There was to be no doubt in their minds that this was it. Jesus would no longer be with them visibly. He would no longer speak with them face-to-face. But He still would build His church through them. You heard today, in our Acts reading, of Lydia in the city of Philippi. "*The Lord,*" it says, "*opened her heart to pay attention to what was being said by Paul.*" Jesus' ascension meant for His apostles that as they spoke of His death and resurrection, He would open the ears and hearts of those who would believe. It was not the apostles who had to go out and make Christians; Jesus would make Christians through their witness.

What does Ascension Day mean for you and me? Take a look at the cross on the wall behind me. Jesus is on the cross, but not with arms outstretched in death. He is on the cross as our ascended Lord. There is great significance here for us. Twice Jesus was lifted up. Once on a cross, and again with His ascension. Both events were necessary for our salvation. Jesus was raised on a cross to take our place in hell. He was raised into heaven to prepare our place there. Jesus was lifted up on a cross to die for every sinner; to pay the price for what we have done against God and our neighbor. He was lifted up into heaven to send forth the Holy Spirit so that His death would not be in vain, but that, by the Spirit's working, you would believe the message of the cross and be saved from your sins.

Both on the cross and in His ascension, Jesus' hands are outstretched. How different is this from those He came to save! Our hands and arms--the hands and arms of sinners--are typically clutched together. We scratch out a living and then hold on, embracing to ourselves what we have earned--the money, the notoriety, the honor. The arms and hands of sinners are often taking, guarding, keeping what we see as ours. We resemble the thief at night, huddled over, walking quickly, his arms clutching his prize to his heart.

Now look at Jesus. In death, and in blessing, He lifts out His arms and opens His hands not to take, but to give. Ascension Day is a wonderful reminder for us that our Lord never stops giving. He did not ascend into heaven with His arms folded tight and His hands closed. He ascended with arms and hands outstretched, for this is how He always wants us within His church to picture Him--as our loving, forgiving, and giving Lord. In your baptism, Jesus' hands are outstretched blessing you with forgiveness of your sins and a new life in Him. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus' hands are outstretched blessing you with His body and blood for your salvation. In preaching and teaching, Jesus' hands are outstretched imparting to you His Holy Spirit and the gifts of His kingdom from the mouth of your pastor.

Even though you and I rarely stretch out our arms and hands; even though we are takers more than givers, Jesus keeps on giving. He gives you what is His. He gives you what He earned on the cross for you. Right now, this very minute, Jesus' hands are stretched out in love toward you. He gives you, from a heart of mercy, forgiveness of all your sins. He forgives you, and He changes you by His mercy, into a giver more like Himself.

The cross on the wall behind me is a depiction of what you are given here every week. Before you leave God's house, your pastor turns toward you and brings together for you these two great events--Jesus' death and His ascension. I stretch out my arms like that of your ascending Lord, and I make the sign of the cross where Jesus' arms stretched out in death for you. And then you are given the word of "peace." This peace is yours because your Lord is giving and forgiving. This peace is yours to live in day after day. And when you, like Jesus, ascend into heaven on the day of your death--ascend because of His death, resurrection, and ascension for you; His forgiveness for you--when you see Jesus in heaven, you will see Him just as He wants you to see Him now...with arms and hands outstretched, outstretched in love, outstretched to welcome you into heaven with joy as the angels sing. For that day, that day my friend, will truly be your homecoming. Amen.