

Pastor Joe Polzin
Luke 24:44-53
“Out of Sight, But Never Out of Mind”
Year B – The Ascension of Our Lord (Observed)
May 13, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Out of sight, out of mind.” It’s a phrase that refers to the ability to forget about something if you’re not in direct contact with it. Sometimes, it can be a beneficial thing, when you don’t want to dwell on something, you simply put it out of sight. Other times, it’s an explanation for why we lose track of something or forget something entirely—it *was* out of sight, so, therefore, it was out of mind.

Sometimes, children use this as an excuse to skirt their parent’s authority. If a parent goes away from them, out of their sight, a child might be tempted to try to neglect their responsibilities. They think that if the parent isn’t in sight for them, they don’t have to mind. Of course, today is Mothers’ Day, and I know many of you mothers know exactly what I’m talking about. Now, children may *think* they can get away with this irresponsibility, figuring they’ll get ship-shape before Mom comes back. What they don’t realize is that mom *always* knows. She has that extra “mom-sense” that will foil any child’s best-laid plans.

But is this how we think of our relationship with Jesus? “Out of sight, out of mind”? After all, today is Ascension Day. Today we hear how Jesus, after spending forty days after his resurrection on Easter, ascended into heaven and out of the sight of his disciples. And now that he is out of sight, do we live like he’s out of mind? Do our lives of faith demonstrate that we believe Jesus is present with us right now? Or do we live like we have him at an arm’s length, like a child trying to get away from his parent’s authority? Or do we simply forget all that we’re supposed to be doing as Christians?

Of course, we are all guilty of this in some way. It’s hard when we don’t have the visual presence of Jesus. We all are guilty of living as if Jesus has gone completely away, is not fully present with us now, and therefore is out of our minds. We may say we believe Jesus is always present with us, but at times our thoughts and our actions may demonstrate otherwise.

Still, we wonder, why did Jesus have to ascend in the first place? Wouldn’t it have been easier if Jesus simply stayed in sight? Stayed in his glorious and resurrected life here on earth? Then we wouldn’t struggle so much with putting him out of mind. And besides, wouldn’t the world be better with him here?

These are some of the questions that may come to our mind this Ascension Day. But as we hear Luke describe the events of Ascension, first in his Gospel, and then again in the first chapter of Acts, is that what the disciples thought about?

For a moment, they did stand there, gazing into heaven, watching as Jesus parted from them. And then two men in white robes stood by them, angels, just like those who stood by the women in the tomb on Easter and asked, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” (Luke 24:5) This time, they asked, “Why do you stand looking into heaven?” (Acts 1:11) Evidently, God created angels to be masters of rhetorical questions.

But then Luke in his Gospel shares the reaction of the disciples. They didn’t stand there questioning why Jesus went away. “They worshiped [Jesus] and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God” (Luke 14:52-53). This is far from a

reaction of puzzlement or sadness. It was a response of worshipful joy. They were *glad*. But Jesus had just left! How could they be joyful?

In the Gospels, the disciples generally don't understand Jesus. Often, they were usually a step or more behind, just as in the dark as the rest of the crowd. But on this day, they finally understood. Their minds had been opened to the Scriptures by Jesus. On this day, they knew exactly what the Ascension truly meant. And it filled them with great joy.

And so we'll look at what the Ascension meant, and still means, for us. In the remaining time of this message, we'll explore four reasons why the Ascension was a necessary and joyful event, both for the disciples, but also for us still today.

The first reason the Ascension was both necessary and joyful is that it means Jesus now rules over all. In the Creed, we weekly confess the Ascension – “He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” Because Jesus took his spot at the Father's right hand, Jesus has been granted power and authority over all things. Paul puts it this way in our Epistle reading from Ephesians, “[God the Father] raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand... far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named... And he put all things under his feet” (1:20-22).

The right hand of the Father is not simply describing Jesus' physical place on the Father's right side. “At His right hand” refers to the role of authority and power that Jesus now has. Jesus is and will forever be above all things as king. There is never anything that can happen that will ever change that. And *because* he rules, and *because* he has shown us great love, we know that Jesus uses his great might towards us for our eternal benefit, saving us from our sin, and keeping us safe from physical and spiritual harm.

The second reason regarding the Ascension is that Jesus is always present with us. This one may seem counter-intuitive. It seems like because Jesus ascended, he left us. But it's actually the opposite. In the description of Easter morning from John chapter 20, Mary Magdalene is at the tomb that morning. And she's distraught because she finds the tomb empty, and is convinced someone has carried away the body of her Lord. While she is weeping, Jesus appears to her. But Mary assumes he is the gardener and asks him if he knows where they've taken Jesus. Jesus simply responds by speaking Mary's name, which is all she needs to realize who it is that was standing before her. And she clings to Jesus.

But then what Jesus says next is somewhat surprising. He says, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father” (John 20:17). And I don't think Jesus is saying, “I need some space, Mary.” What he's saying is that there *will* be a time to cling to him. But it wasn't right then. It would be *after* his ascension. So, what was Jesus talking about?

If Jesus had decided to stay here on earth indefinitely in his resurrected body, he would certainly be visible to our eyes. But he would only be in one physical spot, as he was for Mary Magdalene. Instead, by his ascension, Jesus is able to be present to all believers, in all times, in all places. We are able to cling to Jesus on a daily basis, and he truly present for all of us. It was precisely because Jesus left his disciples that he could truly be with them always.

But how do we know that Jesus is present? Where is Jesus to be found? There are Christians out there who don't believe what we do about God's Word and Sacraments who will have a hard time explaining this one to you. To find Jesus, they may direct you to a vague feeling of closeness that you may or may not feel in your heart. Or they say, if you believe hard enough, you may hear his still, small voice inside of you. But that leaves too much to chance, too much to our own feelings. It's not concrete enough.

But when you take God at His Word, and believe in the gift of His Sacraments, it is a beautiful gift that He gives. Because we *don't* have to wonder where Jesus may be found. He tells us exactly where to look. Jesus promises you that when you open the pages of His Word and read, or hear His Gospel preached, or when His Word of forgiveness goes into your ear, or when you hear your sins absolved by your pastor, or when you feel the water pour over your body and your sins are drowned in Baptism, or when you receive his body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of your sins in Holy Communion, there, in those definite Sacramental moments, Jesus promises to be essentially and truly present. There Jesus invites you to cling to him, daily, just as Mary Magdalene clung to him on that Easter morning. And because Jesus has ascended, you know that he is able to be truly present for you.

And not only is Jesus present with us daily through Word and Sacrament, but also, and this is the third reason regarding the Ascension, Jesus promises to one day come again. “Men of Galilee,” those angels asked, “why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). John writes in the first chapter of Revelation, “Behold, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him” (v. 7). And we confess in the Creed, “From thence[, from the right hand of God,] He will come to judge the living and dead.”

If Jesus did not ascend, he could not return. And he didn't ascend to get away from us. Just the opposite. Because he ascended, not only is he continually present with us, but he assures us, just as those angels assured the disciples, that he promises to return in the same way he went up. We do not know when, but we trust it will be soon.

And that day will be a day of great joy for us. We do not need to fear Christ's judgment on that day, because Christ, who has once-for-all defeated sin, death, and even the devil, has shared his victory with us. When he returns, he promises to restore us and all creation. Because Christ ascended into heaven with his resurrected body, we, too, are assured that we will know the heavenly joys in the day of our resurrection, that we will experience our own bodily ascension into the peace and wonders of God's eternal life.

Which then brings us to the fourth and final reason that Jesus' ascension was both a necessary and joyful event, and it's one that we will explore even further next Sunday when we celebrate Pentecost. Jesus promised that when he left, he would not leave us as orphans. He would send the Holy Spirit to us. From our Gospel today, Jesus said, “Behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (24:49).

In the upper room, Jesus had told his disciples, “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). The disciples didn't understand at that moment, which was before Christ's death and resurrection, but later, they would see that Jesus *would* equip them with the power, and the necessary protection, to do everything that he said they would do, namely, to proclaim “repentance and forgiveness of sins... to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 14:47). Because they would have the power of the Holy Spirit.

The disciples *would* be his witnesses, in phenomenal ways. The word for witness is the same word “martyr.” To be a martyr was to be a witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And the disciples would be martyrs, even losing their lives for Christ, and by doing so, sowed the seeds for the growth of the Church. But not according to their own power. It was according to the power of the Holy Spirit, which enabled them to do so.

Today, *we* are Christ's witnesses, Christ's martyrs. We may or may not be called upon to sacrifice our physical life, but we are willing to give our all for the sake of Christ and His Church. Again, today is Mothers' Day. I don't think there's any better example of this for many of us than the women in our lives: our mothers, our wives, our grandmothers, our aunts, our sisters. Faithful and Godly women who display to us, but also to the world, what it means to live out our faith, demonstrating God's love by how they love others.

All of us are all called upon to be Christ's faithful witnesses. And we know that we are able to do so because we serve and worship a risen and ascended Lord. He may have gone out of sight the day of ascension, but he is never out of mind. Because of Christ's ascension, we know he is king of all, he is truly present with us, he will come again one day soon, and until that day, he has given us the power from on high, the Holy Spirit, who creates faith within us, guides us, protects us, and enables us to be his witnesses. Because of Christ's ascension, the day will come when we will join those disciples who returned to the temple, eternally worshiping Jesus, and continually blessing God forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.