

Seventh Sunday after Easter – May 24, 2020

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Plymouth

Pastor Charles Heup

Luke 24:50-53 (EHV)

He led them out as far as the vicinity of Bethany. He lifted up his hands and blessed them. 51 And while he was blessing them, he parted from them and was taken up into heaven. 52 So they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 They were continually in the temple courts, praising and blessing God. Amen.

Fellow followers of Christ Jesus,

It almost seems as if Ascension Day is a forgotten celebration for many Christians. Most congregations haven't had services on Ascension Day for quite some. However - since this service is being recorded on the 40th day after Easter – the day of Christ's ascension, it seems appropriate for us to spend some time contemplating Christ's Ascension. Our text tells us that Jesus' disciples responded to his ascension by worshipping him. Today, we will join the disciples in worshipping our Ascended Lord.

As We Worship Our Ascended Lord

- I. The Ascended Lord blesses us
- II. We respond in faith with joy and praise

It is most likely that when the disciples gathered for worship on that first Ascension Day that it was an impromptu gathering. This event was probably much like one of the many other times Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection. When Jesus would appear, he would often share a meal with them, and often he would spend time explaining to them what the Scriptures meant. That's what he did with the disciples who were on their way to Emmaus. Shortly before Luke recorded the account of Jesus' ascension he spoke about one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and explained that Jesus "**opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.**" Then "**he told them, 'This is what is written.'**" (Luke 24: 45, 46 EHV) Then he went on to explain what the Scriptures said. This is the way Jesus dealt with them. This is how Jesus' followers worshipped in those days: they listened to Jesus explain Scripture.

This time was no different. [Jesus] **led them out as far as the vicinity of Bethany. He lifted up his hands and blessed them.** Jesus brought his disciples together and gathered them together around his word to give them his blessings.

In his supplement to the Gospels, the book of Acts, Luke fills us in on some of the details surrounding this event. Shortly before Jesus returned to heaven the disciples asked, "**Lord, is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?**" (Acts 1:6 EHV) The disciples must have noticed that something was different this time, and wondered if now might be the time. Even though Jesus had repeatedly told his disciples that his kingdom was not of this world, and it wasn't about power and might here on earth, it seems that at least some of the disciples were still influenced by this idea. When the disciples thought about Jesus ruling Israel they thought that they might become powerful as well. They had followed him all this time, and maybe, just maybe, now it would pay off in an earthly way.

The disciples were still thinking this way, even after all his instruction, even after they had sat at Jesus' feet, listening to a Bible Class by the author of the Bible, even after Jesus had made it clear that Scriptures are all about sin and grace, and about how "**the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.**"

(Luke 24:46-47 EHV) He had made it clear that it was about what God had done for them, not about the glory they would get.

Here's how Jesus responded to their question about the establishment of his kingdom. **"It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."** 9 After he said these things, he was taken up while they were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight. (Acts 1:7-9)

Jesus' Ascension helped to clarify their thinking. The disciples' role in his kingdom was to serve as his ambassadors. Their preaching and worship was to center on the work of salvation which God planned and carried out. Jesus demonstrated that by blessing them. When **He led them out as far as the vicinity of Bethany; He lifted up his hands and blessed them.** Jesus blessed them with the good news of their forgiveness. He blessed them with the promise that he would be with them always, even to the very end of the age. He blessed them with the promise to return to bring them to be with him forever.

"While he was blessing them, he parted from them and was taken up into heaven." Jesus had left them before, but this time was different. This time they knew he wasn't going to reappear like he had done so many times in the last forty days. Jesus had left them and was taken up into heaven. Now what? The disciples' worship had been all about being blessed by Jesus as they heard him speak about repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Now their teacher was gone. How could their worship continue? What would they do now?

Listen to what they did: **"They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 They were continually in the temple courts, praising and blessing God."** They did what the wise men did when they found the Christ child. They did what lepers did, what the centurion with the paralyzed servant did. They did the same thing they had done in the boat after Jesus walked on water. They worshipped him. They praised and blessed God in the temple courts whenever they could.

They could continue to worship him even though he was gone, because they knew worship is a response to blessing from Jesus. Jesus had not stopped blessing them and so they could not stop worshipping him. The apostle Paul reminds **"God also placed all things under his feet and made him head over everything for the church. 23 The church is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."** (Ephesians. 1:22, 23 EHV) Isn't that what we confess when we say he "is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty"? Isn't that what we sing about when we sing "He lives to bless me with his love; he lives to plead for me above; he lives my hungry soul to feed; he lives to help in time of need"? or "He lives to silence all my fears; he lives to wipe away my tears. He lives to calm my troubled heart; he lives all blessings to impart."(CW 152)

Jesus has ascended to heaven to bring us blessings. And we worship him. He lives and reigns on high so that he might shower us with his love and blessings. We worship him in response to the gifts which he continues to give.

Perhaps we forget that at times. At times we might regard worship as an obligation. Maybe we wish worship would be a little more exciting, a little more entertaining. Or we begin worshipping for the right reason but we end feeling that we have done something that should earn us praise.

But that's not worship. That's sin. That's pride. And while some would say that those things have no place in a worship setting, that's exactly where they belong. Worship is where Jesus forgives sin. During

worship his Word changes hearts and changes minds as we hear how Jesus' perfect and selfless life is credited to selfish sinners like us. The ascended Lord blesses his people as they worship him by hearing his Word.

In the past weeks as you have worshipped at home, you have heard these words: "I forgive you all your sins" -- Jesus gives the gift of forgiveness. You have listened to the Gospel message. Jesus gives good news: he lived, he died, he rose again, now he ascended. If you were comfortable and it was safe for you to come to receive the Lord's Supper, you have heard "take and eat, take and drink-- Jesus gives us the gift of his body and blood. At the conclusion of our worship, you have heard "The Lord bless you and keep you" -- Jesus gives us his blessing. That's what happens at worship.

But we can't stay seated in our worship places. As much as we love to be in God's house or to be safely gathered around the Word in homes, we can't stay seated there forever. We need to get up and go about our routine activities. The disciples did, too. Acts even tells us that an angel had to come and ask why they were just standing there looking into the sky. They had to go. But that didn't mean they had to stop worshipping.

"They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 They were continually in the temple courts, praising and blessing God." Jesus had blessed his disciples. Jesus promised to continue to bless his disciples. But now he was gone. They would no longer see him on this earth. Usually, the idea that we are never going to see someone again, never going to be able to talk and be with someone we loved dearly until we see them again in heaven--usually that is not a happy affair. Yes, there is joy because we will see them again, but usually just after we say goodbye the joy is hidden behind tears and sorrow.

But the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy. They were able to continue on with joy because they believed Jesus' promises. They really believed that even though they saw him depart--he was still with them. They really believed that he was now sitting at the right hand of the Father. They really believed that he was preparing a place for them and would come back.

The disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Why Jerusalem? Most of these men were from Galilee. If any city would have been dangerous for them to go back to, it was Jerusalem. Why did they go? They went, because that's what Jesus had told them to do. He told them, **"This is what is written and so it must be: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 Look, I am sending you what my Father promised. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."** (Luke 24:46-49 EHV)

They went to Jerusalem because they believed Jesus' promises--his promise to send them the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem to empower them to serve him. And because they believed Jesus Word, they obeyed Jesus' Word.

They returned to Jerusalem where they continued to **praise and bless God** (cf. vs. 53). Jesus blessed his disciples, and his disciples blessed God. Our text doesn't say exactly how they did that other than by believing and obeying his word. Perhaps they sang. They probably prayed.

We often talk about two aspects of worship. The first and primary aspect is that God gives to us. Christians then naturally respond to what God has done. That is the other aspect of worship. And most often we think of blessing or praising God in terms of words and music (prayer and song) --and rightly so. But the example of the apostles reminds us to praise God by obeying his Word. What higher praise, what greater honor and glory can we give to God, than simply to take him at his Word, and live our lives accordingly?

Our worship may begin as we are seated around the Word, but it does not end there. Our worship continues as we get up to be faithful spouses or obedient children. It continues as we fulfill the roles and responsibilities we have been given in ways that are in keeping with God's desires. It continues as we show love and concern for our neighbors. Obedient lives lived in response to Jesus' blessings are a form of worship and blessing God.

But let's not forget that we can only worship and bless God because he has blessed us. So let us surround ourselves with his blessings. Let us surround ourselves with the means by which he channels those blessings to us. Let us surround ourselves with his Word and his Sacraments in whatever way we can. In other words, let us worship the Lord.

As We Worship Our Ascended Lord

The Ascended Lord blesses us and we will respond in faith with joy and praise. Amen.