

“Ascended, But Not Gone,” Acts 1:1-11, Ascension Sunday, June 2, 2019

Friends, in his much-loved play, **“ROMEO AND JULIET,”** **William Shakespeare** once said, **“A rose by any other name would smell just as sweet!”** In doing so, Shakespeare is reminding us that a **human being**, or perhaps even an **animal**, or even an **inanimate object** can often be spoken of using a **whole host of different words or names!**

And certainly, this is **true for us Americans, isn’t it**, when it comes to our speaking about **the reality of death!?!** In this great era of **“Political Correctness,”** we strive to find **new words; other words, less harsh words** to speak about **the reality of death!**

For example, in our American society, today, **people do not die.** Much more often, people say that they **“pass away;”** they **“expire;”** or they **“depart from this present life.”** Even in the life of the Church, we prefer to speak of people, as **“receiving the crown of life,”** or **“finishing their course,”** or **“being called home to their eternal rest!”**

It simply is not polite to talk about death directly in our society!

What was once called a **“mortuary,”** meaning, literally, **“a place of death,”** is now referred to as a **“funeral home”** or better yet as a, **“memorial chapel.”** And yes, whether we want to admit it or not, these are all seeds that we sometimes plant.

Except, of course, there is that one PROMINENT EXCEPTION, when we find ourselves talking rather gladly, and openly, about the death of that person who has only been a trouble-maker in this life; people who have perpetrated crimes that have scarred the lives of other people, **THROUGHOUT THEIR LIFETIME, TOO!**

When someone dies who has been a **notorious criminal,** when someone dies who has **defrauded, stolen, and robbed others** of their happiness and joy in life, then people may speak of them as a: **“Good Riddance!”**

People may say, with respect to that person: **“I am so relieved, thank heavens, that that “NO GOOD SO AND SO” is finally dead and gone!**

Though our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, is the only begotten Son of God, *“through whom all things were made and without whom nothing has ever been made that has been made”* (John 1:3), for all the **thousands of his followers who loved him, who adored him and who were deeply appreciative for the life-giving, faith-strengthening, hope-renewing sermons he had preached to them, and for all the miracles of mercy he had performed on them and those they loved—not all of Jesus’ contemporaries felt this way about him at all.**

Because Jesus came into a **“sin-filled world,”** full of **“sinful people,”** in many respects, he was a very **“POLARIZING FIGURE”** too. And the same thing is true today! **There are people who love our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who are so grateful that he “bore all of our sins in his body, into death on a tree,”** as St Peter speaks about his saving death, **“so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness, there are others who only despise him!**

On that first Good Friday, when our Lord and Savior, closed his eyes in death, his adversaries were so glad, that according to their way of thinking, Jesus was **DEAD AND GONE!** But their perceptions of Jesus’ final destiny were short-lived, for sure!

Their perception that Jesus was dead and gone, began to be challenged and were greatly shattered when three days later, on that first Easter morning, **the news began to circulate, rumors began to mushroom, and “THE CAT WAS LET OUT OF THE BAG,” THAT JESUS WAS ALIVE AGAIN!!!**

WELL—THIS WAS THE GOOD NEWS, THE HOPE-FILLED MESSAGE, THE JOYFUL PROCLAMATION THAT BEGAN TO CHANGE THE WORLD. Jesus who had died on the cross for our sins, was no longer dead! He was **not dead and gone**, but he was **very much alive and present with his disciples.**

The **first part of goods news** we are celebrating today, my friends, is that though Jesus died, he rose from the dead. Jesus was not dead and gone, but alive and very much present with his disciples. **And the second part of good news we are celebrating today, is that although Jesus is ascended into heaven, he is not gone from us either!**

Friends, do you remember that **popular television program** that first aired on television from 1966 to 1969 entitled: **“STAR TREK”?** In the introduction to that television program every week, the following words were spoken: **“Going where no man has ever gone before!”** except that the content of this program was all fantasy; “made-up” and concocted. The things that happened in those programs were all fictional, but the good news of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ’s ascension 40 days after Easter is not fantasy or fiction but reality and non-fiction.

I can say to you, my brothers and sisters, **“JESUS HAS GONE WHERE NO MAN HAS EVER GONE BEFORE!”** and that’s when you might be tempted to say to me: **“Hold on a minute, pastor, let’s not get ahead of yourself!”** Then you might remind me that **ENOCH** went directly to heaven, without dying first, and that **ELIJAH ASCENDED DIRECTLY INTO HEAVEN IN THAT MAGNIFICENT CHARIOT OF FIRE.** But neither Enoch nor Elijah ascended to the right hand of God!

Yes, Jesus reigns from his exalted throne in heaven, but to say that he “ascended to the Father’s right hand,” means **that he shares fully in all the divine attributes of God the Father.** Just as God the Father is **omniscient**, meaning that he knows everything, Jesus is omniscient too! Just as God the Father is **omnipotent**, meaning that he is all-powerful, Jesus is all-powerful too! And just as God the Father is **omnipresent, present everywhere JESUS IS ALSO NOW OMNIPRESENT and present everywhere too!**

What a beautiful prayer St. Paul is praying in our epistle lesson today (Ephesians 1:15-23), for the believers in Ephesus; a prayer we are wise to pray also for each other today! Paul says: *“I pray that the eyes of your hearts may be enlightened, so that you may come to know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might, when he raised his Son Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, and put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, **the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Ephesian 1:18-23)!***

Yes, Jesus has ascended into heaven, but he is not gone!

And isn't this what Jesus himself said to his disciples, there in the Upper Room in Jerusalem on the night before he died? Jesus said to them, *"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him. If anyone loves me, he will keep my Word and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him"* (John 14:18-23)!

You see, the good news we are celebrating today is that once we have been made one with Jesus and he with us, being baptized into his name, that we might die to sin and live in newness of life to the Father's glory, that we will always be one with him and he with us!

These are the words that the Risen Christ spoke to Jesus' followers in Galilee, one day, St. Matthew tells us: **"BEHOLD, I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, EVEN TO THE END OF THE AGE!"** (Matthew 28:20).

Once we have been made **ONE WITH JESUS IT IS NOT ONLY TRUE THAT WHERE WE ARE THAT HE IS WITH US, IT IS EQUALLY TRUE THAT WHERE HE IS, WE ARE WITH HIM THERE TOO!** That's why St. Paul uses the present tense of the verb: *"Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await the Lord Jesus Christ, who will one day change our bodies to be like his own glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself"* (Philippians 3:20-21).

There is another Ascension hymn that appears in our LUTHERAN SERVICE BOOK, Hymn 494, that speaks powerfully about the meaning of our Savior's Ascension to the Father's right hand.

**Christ has raised our human nature on the clouds to God's right hand;
Riding on the clouds, his chariot; to his heavenly palace gate!
Hark! The choirs of angel voices "Alleluias" sing;
And the ports high are lifted to receive their Heavenly King!"**

Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told the disciples that they were not to leave Jerusalem, but that they were to **WAIT IN JERUSALEM UNTIL THAT GREAT DAY OF PENTECOST WHEN THEY WOULD BE CLOTHED WITH POWER FROM ON HIGH!**

Jesus said next: *"You will become my witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria and to the very ends of the earth"* (Acts 1:8)!

But waiting is not always an easy thing to do, but repeatedly, the Bible tells us that we are to wait upon the Lord.

I love those words of King David that are recorded for us in Psalm 130:5-6, "I wait for the Lord, my soul does wait, and in his Word, do I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than they who watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning!"

And here, I believe, King David was talking about those sentry guards who were scheduled at stationed to be atop the four corners of the Wall that was built around the Holy City of Jerusalem. They dared not fall asleep on the job! What ever they had to do to stay awake and not fall asleep, that is what they did.

And yet the kind of waiting that we see the disciples doing in Jerusalem, was not merely a passive waiting. While they were waiting, they were not just sitting there and **twit-telling** their thumbs.

For St. Luke in Acts 1:12-26 tells us that they returned to Jerusalem, a Sabbath's Day journey away, and entered and went up to the Upper Room where they were staying. Peter and the 10 other disciples devoting themselves to prayer, along with some women folks who were also there, including Mary the Mother of Jesus, and his biological brothers.

Peter referred to two passages in the Psalms, Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8, indicating that these men needed to find a replacement for Judas Iscariot, when they did, making that the candidates chosen were men who also had been disciples of Jesus for the past three years, and by **casting lots**, yes, kind of like, by **flipping a coin**, or **drawing straws**, or the lots determined that this man named Matthias was to take Judas' place, soon to become apostles 10 days later on the **Old Testament Feast Day of Pentecost.**

Waiting is not an easy thing to do, though, is it my friends?

"What are you waiting for?" when we hear these words spoken to us, we may discover that we have suddenly become the source of someone else's frustration! Maybe we are standing in line at the grocery store, or Post Office, waiting for service, or perhaps when we are sitting at an intersection, waiting for the light to change. If we do not jump the gun the very second the traffic light changes to green, someone may even feel compelled to blow their horn at us!

I want to close my sermon this morning by sharing a little story with you about a woman who was waiting in the check-out line at her local supermarket and it was a frustrating experience for her. Although the supermarket had 10 checkout lanes available to customers, only three of those lanes were being served by attendants. And it was 5 PM, everyone was stopping by the grocery store on their way home from work!

But this woman was hoping to purchase a new broom, along with some cleaning supplies, and she was in a hurry.

The line was not moving fast enough to please her, and she was letting everyone feel her frustration--- you've seen this kind of customer before---haven't you, she was attempting to show everyone else there that day, her frustration with her body language and her loud sighs!

When the cashier called for a price check, which delayed her turn at the counter even longer, the woman remarked indignantly: "Well, I'll be lucky to get out of here and home before Christmas!"

Picking up on her comment, the checkout lady who was doing best to keep her cool under frustrating circumstances too, just couldn't keep quiet any longer, so she said: "Don't worry ma'am! With that wind kicking up out there, and the brand-new broom you are purchasing today, you'll be home in no time!"

Are you a good waiter? Do you know how to wait on the Lord? I am sure that there are times when we are all better at this, than we are at other times. But this is certainly one of those instances when getting all hot and bothered would speed up our time in the checkout line at all!

Friends, the disciples did wait, and they used that waiting time as best they could, and ten days later, they certainly were no longer disappointed when the Holy Spirit of God fell upon them in full force, even as the Spirit of God is willing to come to us again today.

Jesus says that there is one prayer God the Father will always answer with a yes, when we asked the Father for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us. Jesus says, **"If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more, will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to you!"** Amen

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

I do like that humorous **story about a man and his wife who took a trip to the Holy Land, and the wife insisted that her mother be brought along on that “vacation,” too.** There they were, certainly enjoying their itinerary, seeing the places where Jesus must have preached the Word of God, and performed many of his miracles. Unfortunately, however, the mother-in-law, unexpectedly and most suddenly became ill and was admitted to the hospital. Two days later she died. That’s when her supposedly loving son-in-law went to the funeral home requesting that his mother-in-law’s body be sent back to the United States.

The attendant at the funeral home told the son-in-law, listen I know you are going to have a hard time believe this but to send your mother-in-law’s body back to the United States, would cost somewhere in the range of \$5000. But the good news is that we could do a nice burial for your mother-in-law here in Israel at a substantial savings; costing you only \$150.

The attendant was shocked when the son-in-law said, “No, let’s just send her body back to the United States!” who continued by saying: “Look, 2000 years ago they buried a guy here and three days later, he rose from the dead. I just can’t take that chance!”

Well the man in this joke begs a serious question, from all of us again this morning, doesn’t he? “Was there actually a man, 2000 years ago, who came back to life from the dead?”

Most of us here this morning, I want to believe, would answer this question with a very loud and resounding yes! And yet we can only believe this because of the sanctifying work of God the Holy Spirit, who in the water of our Baptism came to us, and through our faithful participation in the Means of Grace, God’s Holy Word and sacraments, we continue to be strengthened in our faith too.

Psalm 47:5, “God has gone up with a shout, and the LORD with the sound of a trumpet!” Then there is **Psalm 68:18, “You have ascended on high, you have led your captives, captives,”** meaning mostly: sin, death and the power of the evil one!”

But Jesus himself, in his discourse with Nicodemus and the need for every one of us to be born again into the kingdom of God, went on to say that day: “No one has ascended into heaven, except he who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man!” (John 3:13).

Aside from fulfilling the prophecies, Jesus ascending visibly showed the disciples exactly where he went. He ascended. They saw it happen. The resurrection was not witnessed. It was demonstrated to be true by “many infallible proofs,” but no one actually saw Jesus in those moments when he truly was rising from the dead.

THE ASCENSION, HOWEVER, WAS WITNESSED. THEY SAW HIM RISE INTO THE SKY. Now, this doesn’t necessarily mean that heaven is physically “up.” April 12, 1961, first man in space, there 108 minutes.

One of the early Russian cosmonauts boasted that he could not see God or heaven up there, as he orbited. Although there was a cover story done by TIME MAGAZINE in 1981, saying that this man, Yuri Gagarin, was a devout Christian, and that these words were put into his mouth by the Soviet authorities.

To which C. S. Lewis said, this would be like Hamlet going up into his attic to find William Shakespeare, only to discover that Shakespeare wasn’t there.