

In Nomine Jesu

CHRIST IS PRESENT WITH US NOW

Christ is Risen!

Hear again the Word of God for this *Feast of the Ascension*, 40 days after the Resurrection of our Lord, Jesus the Christ:

“O Men of Galilee, why do all of you stand continually gazing into the heaven? This One, the Jesus, the One having been taken up from you into the heaven, thus He will come from which place you have seen Him go into the heaven.”¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

This evening, on this appropriate calendar day, is when the Church of Jesus Christ celebrates the fourth of the Five Great Feasts of the New Testament Church. In faithful congregations like this, through Word and hymn, the holy ones of God, both mortal and immortal, again hear of Christ our Head taking His place at the pinnacle of God’s Creation. The annual celebrations of this Feast provides us Christians with the reminder that where our Head is there is His Body.

That means that, since our ascended Lord Jesus continues to keep His promise to never leave nor forsake His disciples (those who follow Him, us who bear His Name) He is here tonight. He is present in veiled means – God’s proclaimed and visible Word. That He does for our benefit. That is because of the eternal reality that the unholy cannot remain in the Presence of the Holy. It would be consumed in God’s cleansing fire. In time, the mysteriously concealed real Presence of Jesus with His people has been

¹ Acts 1:11.

grounded in history as recorded in this eye-witness account:

“O Men of Galilee, why do all of you stand continually gazing into the heaven? This One, the Jesus, the One having been taken up from you into the heaven, thus He will come from which place you have seen Him go into the heaven.”²

With those words, the first witnesses of Jesus risen from the dead, those who had seen Him received into the heavens by the cloud, were given comfort. Like us, they lived at a time in history when people were skeptical with regard to God’s revealed spiritual truths. The pagan, unbelieving Greeks around them were familiar with stories, myths and legends of assorted heroes ascending into heaven. Those popular characters often made it to heaven by dying and becoming godlike. (Students of classical Greek literature among us might remember the tale of Hercules on his funeral pyre).

Now, the men whose testimony forms the basis of St. Luke’s second book were not unbelieving Greeks. They were Jews. If we use our Churchly terms, they had been well-catechized from birth. They would have known, perhaps by heart, the record of Elijah’s ascent into heaven (II Kings 2:10-12). They would have heard of Enoch walking with God, being seen among men no more, God having taken him into the heavenly realms (Gen. 5:21-24). It is likely they would have been familiar with extra-biblical Jewish stories of people ascending into heaven. Why, by the time St. Luke recorded their words, it is likely that some of them would soon become familiar with words like these that speak about a man named Baruch (It is

² Acts 1:11.

a long quote, so please bear with the text):

“Hear the Word of YAHWEH the Most High that you know that which will happen to you after these things.

For you will surely depart from this world, nevertheless not to death but to be kept unto (the end) of times.

Therefore, go up to the top of this mountain, and all countries of this earth will pass before you, as well as the likeness of the inhabited world, and the top of the mountains, and the depths of the valleys, and the depths of the seas, and the number of rivers, so that you may see that which you leave and where you go.

This will happen after forty days.

Go, therefore, now during these days and instruct the people as much as you can so that they may learn lest they die in the last times, but may learn so that they live in the last times.”³

That sounds familiar, does it not? It appears to have been written some forty or more years after Jesus’ ascension. Perhaps it was colored by the accounts of that historical event. It certainly could have been carried over into Jewish mythology as non-believing Jews continued to try to discount Jesus’ death and resurrection after the destruction of Herod’s Temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Yet in the year we date A.D. 33, for the men of Galilee addressed by heavenly messengers clothed in white, and for Luke who recorded their eye-witness testimony, Jesus’ ascension into the heaven took place after he had been bodily raised from the dead. He had appeared to them at various times over 40 days. He had dined with them. (Recall St. Luke’s Gospel account of Jesus eating a piece of broiled fish and some honeycomb in their presence (Lk. 24:42-43)). They had touched Him and knew Him to be alive in Body and Spirit (think back to the account of Mary Magdalene clinging

³ Internet. <http://www.yahwehsword.org/books-of-baruch/2nd-book-baruch-076.htm>. Cf. <http://www.augsburgfortress.org/media/downloads/9780800699680Intro.pdf>. Accessed May 16, 2016.

to a very much alive Jesus at the Garden Tomb very early in the morning of His resurrection from the dead (John 20:16-17)).

So, to the first Christians (though they were not called that for some time later), Jesus' bodily ascension into heaven was different. Many of them had seen Him put on trial. Some had followed Him of His way of sorrows – depicted here in the Stations around the Nave. A couple had stood by as He breathed His last, having declared, *τετελεσται* ["Tetelesti," "It is finished"]. Two had asked that His lifeless body be taken down from the Cross, and had laid His corpse in the new tomb. Hundreds had seen Him in the body, after his resurrection from the dead. And, on the day of His ascension, many had witnessed His bodily being taken up from the earth and hidden in the clouds. Perhaps now you might understand a bit better why St. Luke records this about those last to see Him in the flesh as He was lifted up,

And, as they were continually gazing into the heaven as He continued to go, then, behold! Two men were standing by them in white clothing...⁴

Have you ever stood around looking at something in the sky, when nothing was there, just to see what those around you might do? It was what would now be called a "prank" done by high schoolers, at least 40 years ago. Inevitably, others would look up, trying to discern what was the object of such great interest. Only the really extroverted among the imitators would ask, "What are you looking at?" Occasionally, someone would echo the verbalized thoughts of the men in white so long ago, "Why

⁴ Acts 1:10.

*do all of you stand continually gazing into heaven?"*⁵ In any event, off we would run, laughing at how easy it was to lead others into gazing at nothing.

It appears that no one was laughing on that mountain on the day of Christ's ascension. There had been no prank. They seem to have been simply overwhelmed. Yes, they just had heard Jesus' instructions, recorded by Luke, words like this which you heard this evening,

*And, behold! I continue to send the Promise of the Father of Me upon all of you; but you all must have sat in the city until when(ever) you all may have been clothed with power from (on) high.*⁶

They had not yet been clothed in that power – the Holy Spirit. They had also just heard that they were Jesus' chosen witnesses to Him *in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*⁷ Yes, they had heard the words, the commands, the instructions, but, we might say they were in sensory overload. They were trying to take it all in. Then these two white-clothed fellows show up from somewhere and call them back to earth.

Surely they were having thoughts like this: "Where is He now? How long before He returns? He already told us it was not for us to know *time or season which the Father has set by His own authority.* What now?"

From the angelic address, they learned that Jesus would return in like manner to that which He had departed. They did, as the rest of the narrative proceeds, go down into Jerusalem to wait. In 10 days, you will

⁵ Acts 1:11a.

⁶ Luke 24:49.

⁷ Acts 1:8b.

hear of what happened when Jesus' promise to clothe them with power from on high was fulfilled. Then, they began to believe that which they heard. From their testimonies, they began to confess that which, over the centuries to follow, the Church held forth as right-worship confessions of the Faith, namely (and you may recite them as a powerful witness with me tonight):

He ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of God, the Father almighty, whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead." (Apostles Creed).

He ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of the Father: he shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end. (Niceno – Constantinopolitan Creed).

Or, as we sang just before this sermon began:

We all believe in Jesus Christ, His own Son, our Lord, possessing an equal Godhead, throne, and might, source of every grace and blessing... (LSB 954, "We All Believe in One True God").

That same Christ fills all things. That means He is Present with us now in the means He chose. He is preparing us, through His gracious Word, to live and reign with Him. Even now we are His living Body. As we remain attached to Him our Head, we will be with Him forever when He comes again on the clouds.

To that we declare: Christ is risen and ascended!

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Ascension (LSB One-year series)

Psalm 110; II Kings 2:5-15; Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

May 5, 2016

Pastor Michael A. Morehouse

Soli Deo Gloria