

Ascension of Our Lord, 2009

Text: Luke 24:44-53

Title: Amazing Joy

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The ascension of Jesus is a pretty incredible event. Next to Easter and the resurrection, Jesus seems most divine when He ascends to heaven. It's something that none of us can do. It's something that only God can do.

If you ask folks if there's one thing that they wished they were able to do, one special power or ability that they wished they had, flying would probably come near the top of the list. Look at our superheroes, flying through the air. Look at our sports idols flying through the air. We long to be able to fly through the air, not to be bound by the law of gravity, but to go wherever we want.

Jesus just ascends into heaven. Up He goes and He's gone. It's an amazing, miraculous event.

But there's something about this story that's even more miraculous. There's something even more amazing. There's something even more incredible than Jesus flying up to heaven. Listen how the story ends: "While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God." The disciples actually rejoice when Jesus is gone.

This was not their reaction when Jesus left them the first time. When Jesus died, and they thought He was gone, the disciples were scared. They were hiding out of fear. Even on Easter morning after they had heard the report of the women, the disciples were still afraid and hiding. They were hiding with the doors locked. We'd expect the disciples to act the same way now. We'd expect them to be hiding out of fear and sadness. Jesus has left them. Jesus has gone back to heaven. After forty days with them on earth, Jesus now returns to His Father's right hand.

But the disciples aren't sad. The disciples aren't afraid. The disciples aren't in hiding. Instead, the disciples rejoice. And they are out in public, in the temple, blessing God and worshipping Him there. This is amazing. This is more amazing even than Jesus returning to heaven.

When a loved one leaves, it's usually a sad occasion. It's hard to rejoice when you say good-bye to your kids and your grandkids and you don't know if or when you'll be seeing them again. It is hard to rejoice at a funeral, even when we know that we will see our loved ones again. When someone leaves, we're sad. We're not happy.

So where does the disciples' joy come from? How can they rejoice at a time like this? It's all Jesus' doing. It's all because of Him.

Before Jesus leaves, Jesus makes the most of His time with the disciples. He uses this time to prepare them for His return to His Father's right hand. St. Luke tells us that Jesus had a bit of Bible Study with His disciples. Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.

It actually takes Jesus to open our minds to understand what's going on. None of it makes any sense without Him. That God would suffer and die for us. That through His death we have life. These are too incredible to wrap our minds around.

The disciples never did understand that Jesus had to die. They never got it on their own. Even though Jesus told them at least three times that He would die and rise again, it never clicked. It never made sense. Until Jesus finally opened their minds to understand who He was and what He was up to.

So it is for us. On our own, we could never understand who Jesus is and what He's up to. The Bible doesn't make sense to us on our own. This is why Paul says in our Epistle, "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you."

If you understand Scripture, give thanks to the Lord for opening your mind. If you don't understand, then pray for the Lord to open your mind.

So you shouldn't be surprised when people distort Scripture, when they deny Scripture, when they ignore Scripture, when they argue against what God says. You should expect this. Apart from God we can never understand His Word. And there are so many people who try to figure Scripture out on their own.

But Jesus opens their minds and He opens ours. And He lets us know what He's all about. "The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

Jesus is about the forgiveness of sins. This is why He suffered. This is why He rose. This is why He sent the disciples. This is what gives the disciples joy.

This Easter season we've been hearing how Jesus continues to work even after His resurrection. No rest, no breaks, no vacation for Jesus. That's been the theme of our Scripture readings. Jesus appeared to His disciples and to Thomas, bringing them peace. Jesus makes us His children in Holy Baptism. Jesus cares for us as the Good Shepherd. Jesus connects to Himself and to one another as the true vine. Jesus befriends us.

That's what we've seen Jesus doing here in the past six weeks. In all of these, Jesus is forgiving our sins. Each of these is a picture or a story of forgiveness. It's what Jesus has come to do. And He's the only one who can do it.

Only Jesus can forgive your sins. There are plenty of other people out there who will love and care for you, who will support you and encourage you in difficult times. But only God can forgive sins. All sins are against God, and only He can release you from your sins.

But how can Jesus forgive the sins of the whole world? How can one person personally and individually forgive all sins? That's where the disciples come in.

On the cross Jesus won forgiveness for everyone. But that forgiveness is not delivered from the cross. We can't go to Calvary and get forgiveness there. Jesus is not there any more. Jesus was buried. Jesus rose again. Jesus spent forty days with His disciples. Jesus ascended to God's right hand. Jesus is no longer on the cross.

We can't go to Calvary and get forgiveness there. Forgiveness is not delivered from the cross. Forgiveness is delivered in the preaching of the gospel. Forgiveness is delivered in Holy Baptism. Forgiveness is delivered in Holy Absolution. Forgiveness is delivered in the Lord's Supper.

And to deliver all of these things, Jesus sends out the disciples. He sends them to preach and to baptize and to forgive and to feed. In all of these things, Jesus delivers His forgiveness.

He does not send the disciples out alone. He clothes them with power from on high. The Holy Spirit. That will come next week at Pentecost, so come back for all of that. The Holy Spirit will be at work here, doing His thing.

Jesus leaves so that the disciples will carry out His mandate and forgive sins. Starting in Jerusalem, but not ending there. From Jerusalem to the rest of Judea, from Judea to Samaria, from Samaria to the ends of the earth, even to this little church here at the ends of the earth in Oak Lawn, Illinois. Jesus forgiveness is still being given out, in accordance with the words He spoke to His disciples.

This task was too great for just the eleven disciples, so as they went out they appointed more and more men, laying hands on them and placing them into this same office, to deliver the gifts of forgiveness.

This is where their joy comes from. Jesus is gone, but it's not the end. They've said good-bye, but it's not the end. There's still work to be done, forgiveness to be given out, and the disciples have been made apostles to do this work.

It's a new beginning. A new story is about to start. The Gospel according to St. Luke is over, but the Acts of the Apostles is just beginning. The ascension of our Lord is the hinge. It's the turning point.

Our Easter season is drawing to a close. But next Sunday will be Pentecost. Next Sunday will be confirmation. Three young people will come forward and start a new chapter in their lives as they receive Christ's body and blood for the first time.

So rejoice with the disciples, this ascension day. Yes, Jesus can fly, but that's not the big deal. Jesus forgives sins, and that's cause to rejoice. Jesus work continues, even after His ascension. He continues to forgive sins today, and every Sunday until He returns.