

THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD

Luke 24:44-53

Friends in High Places

He's ascended, enthroned in glory, and what is His will be ours one day. He's ascended, and He guides the way, for where He went we too are going. He's ascended, and salvation is secure as the doors of heaven have swung open and the gates of hell slammed shut. He's ascended, and with His departure heaven draws near. He's ascended, and He is forever what for us He became: God and Man—the One who orders the stars and our sympathetic High Priest. He's ascended, and we are not forgotten, for He who saved us in love now rules in love, and we are foremost in His mind. He's ascended, yet He still speaks and opens minds through instruction in His Word and His Holy Supper. He's ascended and all that is changed is that what the Church once saw with physical eyes it now sees by faith. He's ascended and now, He who before was dressed in frailty, cloaking His divine glory, is arrayed in all the splendor due Him, shining like the Sun, as He now for us and our salvation in His exaltation uses all that He before willingly in love chose not to employ in His humiliation for us and our salvation.

Garth Brooks croons, "I've got friends in lower places." Perhaps you have friends in lower places. I have friends in lower places. They're fun people. But friends in lower places won't get you very far in life. Fraternities, social clubs, business guilds—they all exist for a reason: connections. While friends in lower places are fun, friends in higher places are far more advantageous.

Think about our text today. Don't we all wonder a bit why the disciples didn't weep, didn't protest, didn't pout when Jesus ascended. They did the last time He left them, when He gave up His spirit, was buried, and descended into hell. They mourned. They were frightened. They were confused. Perhaps they were even a bit angry. Why none of that now? St. Luke tells us: "*Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*"

What a strange departure! The only happy departures most of us have ever known are those when we leave a bad situation or awkward conversation. Loved ones don't like departures. Mom cries when Junior moves out and Dad does his best to mask his sadness with fortitude. Wives weep when their husbands go off to war. Children get upset when their parents leave the house. When a loved one leaves, we wish we could go too, and we mourn our loss. But not the disciples. Hear again: "*Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*"

Why this joy? Why this patient eagerness? Because they knew what it means when the Church confesses: "*He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*" Caesar boasted: "I came. I saw. I conquered." Christ can rightly say: "I came. I saved. I ascended." Christ, who had befriended mankind in His incarnation, redeemed it in His crucifixion, and renewed it in His resurrection, would now ascend on high to guide it in His ascension. The disciples now truly had a Friend in high places.

"*He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.*"

Sound familiar? Seems like the resurrected Christ has been unpacking the Scriptures for His disciples every week now. Its interesting that, while the other Evangelists speak of times when the disciples "remembered that it is written..." to describe those holy aha moments when things clicked for the disciples, St. Luke twice uses this picture of something being opened: here and with the Emmaus disciples. The Lord's Supper triggered the holy aha of the Emmaus disciples, when their

eyes were opened in the breaking of bread and the Scriptures were opened to them as Jesus taught them. Here the disciples' minds are opened in a holy aha as they listen to Jesus unravel the Scriptures so they could go and do the same.

The Ascension was a reminder for the disciples that everything had been fulfilled. Their minds were opened so that, like a steel trap, they might close on the comfort of the Ascension: the realization that they now had a Friend in high places, that everything necessary for their salvation had been completed. Christ came. He saved. He ascended.

Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and now the Ascension. All that is left is for Him to come again. He returns to heaven, and one would think this would be an occasion for great sadness, but no, it is an occasion for great joy. For He who descended in love ascends in love as well. He who subjected Himself to the world now returns to His throne to govern the world subject to Him. He who rose to give hope to those terrorized by death has ascended to give hope to those terrorized by life, to prepare a life in all its intended fullness for us in the Paradise.

Remember Joseph? His brothers, jealous of their father's love for him, sold him into slavery. He was taken to Egypt for what seemed to be a cruel life of tiresome labor. But, with time, Joseph distinguished himself by his faithful work and wisdom. Famine struck, and it just so happened that Joseph had ascended to the right hand of the Pharaoh, second in command of the entire kingdom, with all of Pharaoh's power and authority at his disposal. Hungry and desperate, Jacob sent Joseph's brothers to Egypt to buy food. Joseph recognized them and, forgiving them, fed them with Egyptian food, and made them a home in his kingdom. So also, Christ, our Brother and the beloved Son of our heavenly Father, whom we sold into death, has been raised to the right hand of the Father and reigns with all of God's power and authority at His disposal. He has forgiven us our wrongs and now feeds us, once hungry and desperate in spiritual famine, with heavenly food, given us in the Sacrament. He makes us an eternal home in His kingdom, in Paradise.

Departures are often sad, but this is no time for tears. This is a time for joy, for patient eagerness, for though Christ has left us, He is as close as ever. His ascension is not so much "goodbye" as "see you soon." Remember what the right hand of God means. We shake right hands as a sign of peace, because, for most people, the right hand is the dominant hand, the most powerful hand, the one that bears the sword and packs the punch, and so when someone offers you their right hand, it means they are not holding some threat in it. Christ is at the Father's right hand. He bears the Father's sword and packs the Father's punch, and He promises to use that power for us. Thus, what seems to be the Church's loss in the Ascension is actually its gain, so that now when you turn on the news and hear how bird flu is going to wipe out civilization and this or that country has nukes and this job is gone and that tax is up and this style is out of fashion, even though your closet is full of it, you can take a deep breath and reassure yourself: "*He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*" Our ascended Lord is in control of this mess and He will work it for our good, even though that good may come through much tribulation.

Friends in lower places—those can be fun. But friends in high places are what we really need; and you have one. The Ascension, which has now largely fallen by the wayside in many churches, was always one of the chief celebrations of the Church Year, and for good reason. We do not have a God who is far away, but one who is near. Heaven has drawn near in Christ, and where the Shepherd is, His flock can never be far away. He who knows you better than anyone else and loves you more than anyone else has all the authority and power of the Godhead at His disposal and He promises to use it for your benefit. "*He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*" Wow! Talk about friends in high places. Talk about a departure to celebrate. Amen.