

Luke 24:44-53  
"Jesus is Still with Us"  
The Ascension of Our Lord

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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

For four days in October 1529, the reformers Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli met at Marburg Castle in order to bring theological unity to the fledgling churches of the Reformation. After agreeing on every other theological position, Luther and Zwingli came to a stalemate on a major theological issue. This stalemate is what divides the Lutherans and the Reformed to this day: the "real presence" of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Zwingli, employing human reason, insisted that the Lord's Supper was only a symbolic remembrance. Luther, holding fast to God's Word, maintained that Christ gives His body and blood for us Christians to eat and to drink and thereby receive forgiveness. You may think, how could these two men who were ordained in the Roman Church be so different? Well, when the Reformation got going, many of the Reformers desired to throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak, by starting over apart from God's Word.

Zwingli was no different from many today who believe that they are smarter than all those who preceded them, including the apostles and Church Fathers. Zwingli believed that he was enlightened. So, he was "woke" before the term "woke" existed. Zwingli believed he knew better than the Scriptures.

From the very beginning of the New Testament Church, outsiders accused Christians of being cannibals, because they heard that Christians ate flesh and drank blood. These outsiders didn't understand that the body and blood eaten and drank were outwardly bread and wine. This Zwingli ignored. Despite the Bible and centuries of church practice, Zwingli believed that he was right and everyone before him was wrong.

At the heart of this dispute between Luther and Zwingli is a dispute that remains today. It is understanding who Jesus is and what His ascension into heaven means for us.

For 40 days after His bodily resurrection, the risen Lord Jesus met with His apostles – that is, the 11 and those who were gathered with them in order to bring unity of witness to a fledgling New Testament Church. Jesus passes through locked doors. He speaks peace upon them. He displays His pierced wrists and feet, allowing them to touch Him and see that He is really present and not a spirit, or a product of their own imagination. He eats a piece of broiled fish before them. He teaches them, showing how everything in the Scriptures was written about Him and is fulfilled in Him.

Jesus taught them nothing new. Indeed, Jesus says, ***“These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you”*** (Luke 24:44). Wait. Isn’t Jesus with them during these moments as He calms their fears, eats with them, and teaches them? Yes, but in a new way. Before, Jesus walked among them in humility as His divine nature was hidden. Now He is exalted, having been raised by God the Father. No longer does He refer to Himself as the Son of Man. Now, Jesus openly calls Himself the Christ – the Messiah. No more what ifs. He is, indeed, God in human flesh.

As the exalted Christ, His visible presence becomes an exceptional presence. Just as He kindly spoke to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, Jesus must ascend to the Father (John 20:17). And so that’s what He now does: ***“Then He led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands He blessed them. While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven”*** (Luke 24:50-51).

But doesn’t this mean that Jesus is now far away? In our reading from Acts 1, Luke records that the apostles and other disciples stood gazing up into heaven as they saw Jesus ascend. We can picture them straining their eyes to see Him. They gaze after Him until they cannot see Him.

Aren’t they being left alone, at least until Jesus returns from those clouds to judge the world? Aren’t we being left alone now that Jesus has become this distant God, way far away up there in heaven?

Don’t you have times when you wish that Jesus wasn’t so far away? Oh, Jesus, why won’t you return now to make all this worldly corruption disappear? Why do you just sit in heaven and allow all this evil to happen? Well, that’s what our human reason – *our human understanding* – tells us. If we can’t see Jesus, He must be far away, a God who isn’t here for us when we need Him.

This is what Zwingli thought. He believed that Jesus was far away. Zwingli saw Christ's ascension as His great escape from earth to be seated at God the Father's right hand at some faraway place at the edge of the universe. For Zwingli, Jesus went far away, and He'll only come back to us on the Last Day.

Luther thought much differently. He trusted in Christ's words, "***And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age***" (Matthew 28:20). Luther understood that Jesus has established a new way in which He visits His people and redeem them.

During the course of this debate at Marburg, Luther came to realize that Zwingli was of a different spirit than the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures can only be spiritually understood, and this is something that only God can do for us. Zwingli rejected this working of God's Spirit and leaned upon his own understanding. He thought that if he can't understand it, it must not be true. If he hasn't seen it happen, it could not happen. Luther however, through the working of the Holy Spirit received the proper understanding to have his "mind and heart opened to understand the Scriptures and to listen to the Word" (FC SD II 26).

Listen to the Word and have your minds and hearts opened to understand the Scriptures today. Jesus doesn't abandon us in His ascension. Rather, He continues to be truly present with His people by new means. He is still with us, for Christ is truly present in His gifts, or what the Church calls the Means of Grace.

By His ascension, Jesus is put "***far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named***" and "***all things are put under His feet ... as head over all things to the Church***" (Ephesians 1:21-22). In His ascension, the Crucified and Risen Lord has risen even higher! Christ sits on His holy throne as the Great King over all the earth (Psalm 47), reigning His death and resurrection over us, distributing His sacrificial gifts to His people.

These gifts are no mere symbols or simple remembrances of what He's accomplished on our behalf. Rather, they are the means by which Christ gives Himself, His Word, and His work to us. These means rest upon Christ's own name; that is, on the basis of everything that the name of Christ represents: His revelation, chiefly in the cross and resurrection! Resting upon Christ's name, these gifts have both authority and power, right and might to accomplish that for which God has purposed them.

Repentance and forgiveness of sins is accomplished first through the Gospel's preaching: *"that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead"* (Luke 24:46). The Gospel creates faith where there is none and strengthens the believer.

We are joined to this very same crucifixion and resurrection in the waters of Holy Baptism. It is a Baptism in which we live as God's holy people.

The cross is placed upon us in Holy Absolution, wherein repentant hearts receive forgiveness.

Christ feeds us His very body and blood, given to us Christians to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of our sins, in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Being thus forgiven, we mutually forgive one another, as we pray, "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." And our brother or sister receives Christ through that word.

Each of us wish to see Jesus. He isn't in some far away place. Because of His ascension, He sits now at God's right hand with all power and dominion over all things. He is no longer restricted to time and space. He has full control over time and space. With this power and authority, Jesus is present at each church service around the world.

While Christ parted from His apostles' and disciples' sight, being carried up into heaven, He raised His hands in blessing. His hands remain lifted to bless us, to bless our witness and our worship. Just as He blessed Luther, granting Him a bold confession at Marburg, Christ opens our minds to understand and our hearts to believe He is truly present with us today in His Word and Sacraments. And so we are made bold to witness Christ's suffering, atoning death, bodily resurrection and ascension as we worship Him who is still with us! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +**