

"Ascension Comprehension"

Forty days after Easter, our Savior's ministry on earth was done. After convincing his disciples of the resurrection, equipping and commissioning them to make disciples of all nations, Jesus ascended into heaven. But where did he go? On the basis of many passages of Scripture, we confess that Jesus ascended into heaven where he "sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty. This description is not depicting a specific physical location somewhere in space. Rather, God's right hand is an image connoting power and authority. It is the closest position of trust and honor. All things in heaven and earth, even the angels, are subject to him. This is what has happened to Jesus. He has been given all power and authority. All his divine attributes and characteristics are freely used in any way he pleases. Sitting at God's right hand does not confine Jesus to a limited place, but indicates that he is free from any limitation. He does what he pleases, and he wants to bless his church. The earthly ministry of Jesus concluded with his ascension, but his ministry on behalf of his people never ends. He continues to serve us even today."¹

I give you this explanation from a book written by Dr. Steven Mueller, Dean of Christ College at Concordia University in Irvine not because my daughter is a student there but because the ascension is a significant event in our Christian lives and his explanation gets straight to the point. It's is a big deal.

It's right up there with Christ's birth, his death, and his resurrection because it is the ascended Christ that interacts with each of us everyday. Have you given this much thought lately? It's not the baby Jesus that comes to us; it's not the crucified Jesus or even the resurrected Jesus who hung out with his disciples those few months on earth, but the born, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Jesus who guides our lives through his Spirit. So with that being the case, no matter where we are in our Christian walk, I think all of us could use a little more of what I'm calling "ascension comprehension," because Christ's work in our lives is constant and unending!

¹ Mueller, Steven: *Called to Believe, Teach, and Confess*. Eugene: Wipit & Stock, 2005

Listen again to what Luke shares in Acts: "In the first book (that would be Luke's Gospel), O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up." The key word here is began. All of the words Jesus spoke and all of the things Jesus did up to the day of ascension was just the beginning! Luke was telling Theophilus and he is telling you and me, that Jesus kept on doing for his people even after he ascended into heaven. That's good news!

But sometimes it doesn't seem that way does it? For many of us pain and heartache rule the day and the thought may cross our mind that if Jesus is in fact still "doing for his people," he's not very good at showing it. Kids get sick; marriages break up; jobs disappear; plans don't work out and doors get closed. Sometimes these and many things like them even cause baptized children of God to lose faith. Because the reality, at least in our minds, is that Jesus sometimes seems as distant as the stars above. Have you ever felt that way? I know I have. But the truth is because of the ascension he's not distant. In fact he's even closer than ever before guiding and protecting our lives. It may not be the way we want or even the way we feel sometimes but he is there with all power and authority.

That's how the world of the ascended Christ works. It is our real world. It was also the real world of the early Christians in the Book of Acts.

Acts begins with a small group of believers, gathered together somewhere in Jerusalem. This small group was it. They were the Christians. But by the end of Acts and about 28 years later, the Gospel had spread so far that the message was in route to be delivered to the emperor in Rome. It wasn't easy. In fact, for the disciples whom Jesus instructed to be his witnesses to Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth, it was a tough assignment. These folks were like door- to door- salesmen today. Most didn't want to be bothered with what they were selling. But no matter how many times they were rejected, the Holy Spirit was there guiding their lives. The Holy Spirit was there when they had doubts; he was there when everything seemed to be going wrong and they wanted to give up. Through it all, they were successful in bringing the Good news of the Gospel to so many people.

That certainly doesn't sound like the work of a distant God does it? That's the work of God in Christ who was involved in the lives of his people. And it is the work God in Christ through the Holy Spirit has done and continues to do in your life and mine.

Take a moment and look back on your life. If you're like me, a lot of things in the past that were not very clear have become crystal clear. Am I right? You may be able to see now how Christ's Spirit has taught you things through everyday life even though some of those experiences may have been extremely frustrating at the time.

I remember as a High School senior making plans to attend Lenoir Rhyne College in Hickory. My best friend and I were going to be roommates. Everything was set. But right before High-School graduation, circumstances changed and I ended up at NC State in Raleigh. It wasn't my first choice and I actually ended up transferring from there after two years. But guess what? During those two years there, I met my bride of 21 years and the mother of my 5 kids. I had no way of knowing on the day my plans to attend Lenoir- Rhyne changed what I know now- that the Lord had my life's partner waiting for me in Raleigh. I remember being so disappointed not being able to go to the college I wanted but today firmly believe this is what The Lord was doing in my life, even though I couldn't see it.

Do you have an example in your mind? Maybe it's not cute and sweet like meeting your spouse. For many, including myself, parts of the past are anything but cute and sweet. Life is full of hurt, disappointments and frustrations. Parents divorce, life gets cut short by accidents and disease; temptations get the best of us... the list goes on and on.. such is life in a sinful world. But the sinful world is the real world isn't it?

It is for us and it was for disciples in the book of Acts. That's what makes the book so consoling, I think, because it is Jesus working through his Spirit in the real world. And there are a lot of similarities to what we all experience as Christians. If you haven't read it in a while, maybe take some time this week to do so. You will find that God didn't fix it so that everybody politely listened to what the disciples had to say. He didn't cause them to all get along during their journeys or give them bags of money to be comfortable. Life as a disciple of

Christ was hard as it still is today. But he did guide their lives as his redeemed children just as he guides ours.

The crucified, resurrected and ascended Christ just as he did with the early Christians in Acts, still has that unlimited power to be present in the lives of his people. The ascended Christ continues to come to us and forgive us through his word and sacraments; he continues to love us as we really are, and he continues to work in our lives through his Spirit blessing us and using us to bless others as his witnesses even when we can't see it or make sense of it.

Looking back on our lives, even in the worst of times, we can all hopefully see Christ the Lord having it all under control, guiding us through his Spirit and placing others in our paths who were right where they needed to be.

The other day I received an email that included these words from a father concerning his son's serious illness. "We are letting God be God. We know he has a purpose and a plan for this trial we are going through but it sure is tough when it's your child."

That's why having an "ascension comprehension" of life is so important. It's not about questioning where Christ is our lives when things don't make sense or abandoning him to try and fix it all on our own. It's about letting the Lord be the Lord. It is about turning to him as the one who is in complete control. It's about receiving the love he has for us in faith, and boldly showing others what that love means through our words and actions. It's about standing firm with the one who stands with us even though we might not be able to see the big picture. Sounds a lot like the early Christians in Acts to me.

May the ascended Lord who guided them to trust his promise of salvation and used them to spread this most wonderful news, continue to do the same for you and me today. **Amen.**