

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

The Ascension of our Lord

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***Witness in view of Christ's ascension***

I wrote my first book, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began doing and teaching <sup>2</sup>until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After he had suffered, he presented himself alive to the apostles with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and told them things about the kingdom of God.

<sup>4</sup>Once, when he was eating with them, he commanded them, "Do not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for what the Father promised, which you heard from me. <sup>5</sup>For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

<sup>6</sup>So when they were together with him, they asked, "Lord, is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

<sup>7</sup>He said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

<sup>9</sup>After he said these things, he was taken up while they were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup>They were looking intently into the sky as he went away. Suddenly, two men in white clothes stood beside them. <sup>11</sup>They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here looking up into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

—Acts 1:1-11

Do you find that being a witness for Christ is challenging? I do. Even though that is why Jesus has left us here, it's still hard. We are here to show forth the praises and glory of Jesus in every aspect of our lives. That is why we are here in this world. That is why Jesus has left us here in the world. We are to be his witnesses. But that is challenging. It's difficult. And every Christian is different. Some Christians find it challenging to live their lives for Christ when they are in a group that tends to do things that go against what Christ wants. Instead of standing up and being different, they go along with the crowd. It's hard to be different from everybody else. It's challenging. Some Christians are on the opposite end of the spectrum. They are the ones that are always carefully toeing the line. In fact, they are so aware of what is right and wrong that sometimes they come across as snooty with others. They are constantly pointing out errors in other people's lives and turning people off. It's challenging. And then you have a wide range of Christians in between. You saw an opportunity to witness for Christ with a friend, but you didn't say anything. You kick yourself for it. It's challenging.

I don't think any Christian would ever admit that witnessing for Christ is super easy. In fact, Jesus says some straightforward words in the Scriptures that witnessing for him will be challenging. We need to deny ourselves which is always painful. Christ calls upon us to put ourselves aside in order to give an accurate and loving witness for him. That's difficult. That's a challenge. And the truth is that many times witnessing for Christ can be a dangerous adventure. A friendship is on the line. Your reputation is at stake. What will people say? What will they do? What if I say something wrong? That one gets a lot of people. They are afraid to give a witness for Christ because they are afraid of saying something wrong.

Well, today I'd like to go with you to the mountain from which Jesus ascended into heaven. I'd like to stand there with you and Jesus' disciples and be reminded that it is important to **witness in view of Christ's Ascension**. On that day, Jesus left. He took off. Our lesson from the book of Acts gives the outline of the story. **"I wrote my first book, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began doing and teaching <sup>until</sup> the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen."**

God used a Christian named Luke to write this letter to a man named Theophilus, and it's a book about danger. Jesus left his disciples behind. Their Lord made no world tour to confirm his teachings. He didn't watch from the car as they knocked on doors. He was gone. Jesus seemed to leave them little, if any, visible help. He didn't leave a dynasty or build a big church to be their home base. That's what the disciples wanted. **"So when they were together with him, they asked, 'Lord, is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'"** Those early Christians wanted a glorious kingdom here on earth. They wanted the glitz, the glamour, the safety and security of the olden days when kings like David and Solomon ruled. They wanted a cushy and comfortable life. That, of course, is putting the disciples in a worst-case scenario. Perhaps we could be a bit gentler with them. They had witnessed their Lord accomplish his mission of being the world's Savior. He did everything his Father had sent him to do. Lived a perfect life, died an innocent death, rose from the dead guaranteeing victory. And now only one thing remained. No more danger. No more living in this broken and messed up world. The disciples believed that Jesus was going to do that because Jesus promised that. So,

the best-case scenario for the disciples was that they were asking Jesus if it was time to leave this world of pain and sorrow. "Is it time now, Lord?" But no matter how the disciples approached this question, Jesus reveals that he has other plans. **"He said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."**

And then the rest of the book of Acts is how those plans came to fruition. We see in Acts how Jesus carried out those plans of the church exploding into the world. The church grew. That was God's plan. But while the numbers increased, Christians died. The same powerful people who put Jesus on the cross were still in power. And they didn't like Jesus' little followers any more than they liked their teacher. Those men and women were outnumbered and on the run. They were threatened, tortured, tried, and crucified. And Jesus didn't come back to stop the persecution. So, it's a safe bet that when these folks got together around God's Word, they thirsted for the Word. They longed for the fellowship with fellow Christians. They prayed and cried and supported one another. They faced a dangerous adventure as they witnessed for Christ, so these Christians gathered together so that they were equipped to witness for Christ.

You and I might think we have little in common with that early church. That danger, that adventure, isn't exactly the environment we face today. Most of us aren't afraid of anyone. Maybe annoyed and frustrated with a lot of things that are going on, but we aren't worried about dying for our faith. Sometimes that fact can give the impression that spiritual things in our lives are ... well, boring. It's tough to see their urgency. It's a struggle to see their relevance. It's a challenge to be inspired by the same songs and sermons that we've heard before. But if you think that we are so different from that early church, think again. Look around. Look up to the sky. Check under the pews. Jesus isn't back yet. Just like those disciples, we have a mission to carry out and our commander isn't visibly present. And our mission is just as dangerous, just as "impossible." Our churches aren't prestigious clubs for the brightest and the best. You won't find many world class athletes here. Not many who have aced the A.C.T. No, we're kind of like the apostles. Ordinary people with ordinary jobs and ordinary abilities, but we are called to do something extraordinary. We are called to share a message that can be social suicide and is so politically incorrect that your professors and politicians would laugh at your confession.

I don't have to tell you that carrying out Jesus' message is a challenge. For all their faults, those early Christians had a confidence that is rare these days. Jesus told them, **"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,"** and they were. That kind of faith is so rare. Some studies say 98% of Christians don't share their faith on a regular basis. 98%! 98 out of every 100 Christians are too scared to share the message of Jesus. Too scared of what others will think, what they will say. Too scared that the words won't come out right. Too scared to move out of the lukewarm comfort of an evangelism-less life. And maybe you and I have been there, too. We've been scared or indifferent or lukewarm or just plain too preoccupied with the things of this world that we are not on fire to be Jesus' witnesses in everything we do and everywhere we go.

What we need is to keep our eyes on Jesus' ascension. We need to see what that moment was all about and how it applies to us today. That trip up to heaven was more than just a fancy way to get from point A to point B. It was powerful proof Jesus' mission had been accomplished. The Scriptures say, **"(Jesus) came to seek and save what was lost."** He *came* to find those of us lost in the sins of fear and save us. He *came* to free us from our self-indulgent ways. He *came* to rescue us from a materialistic world. In John 14, Jesus said, **"I am going (to my Father's house) to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."** That ascension reminds us Jesus is taking care of the mortgage on a new home called heaven. Jesus, disappearing behind the clouds, tells us that forgiveness is more than some abstract religious concept; it is a living, breathing thing; a reality won for us by our ascended Lord.

The cloud is significant. Instead of conveying the idea that Jesus is now absent, gone, the cloud signifies his presence. God's presence among his people of the Old Testament was often signified by a cloud. He led the Israelites through the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land with a pillar of cloud by day and pillar fire by night. The cloud appeared over the entrance to the worship facility God directed them to build, indicating, "God is here!" His cloud appeared at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, indicating, "God is here!" The ascension cloud, therefore, was not a way for Jesus to pull out of the scene or to go far away so that he could sit on a golden throne on some distant galaxy with his arms crossed watching this planet in boredom. No! The ascension cloud says, "Jesus is still here among his people!"

In an essay entitled "Heaven and Hell," Dr. Siegbert Becker wrote, **"Another question which is often asked is 'Where is heaven?' When I was a boy on the farm we had an unbelieving neighbor who once asked my father where heaven was. When my father said that he did not know, the unbeliever said, 'It must be beyond the farthest star, mustn't it?' And my father agreed that this must be the case. I suppose that this is a common opinion, namely that heaven is beyond the reaches of outer space.**

**"This view of heaven is very common in Reformed theology, which argues that since Christ is in heaven his body and blood must be as far from the earthly elements as heaven is distant from the earth. I suppose that many of us grew up as I did, visualizing the ascension of the Savior in such a way that we imagined that Jesus reached the**

cloud layer and then disappeared into it, and if the cloud had not come between Jesus and his disciples they could have continued to watch him until he would have disappeared as a tiny speck in the sky.

“While there is probably no particular harm in such a view, yet it hardly does justice to the words of the Bible dealing with the ascension. Jesus did not go far away when he ascended. Shortly before that event he gave his disciples the promise, ‘Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’ Moreover, St. Paul says that the Savior ascended up far above all heavens that he might fill all things, in other words, that he might be present everywhere. In answer to the Reformed argument that Jesus’ body could not be present in the Lord’s Supper because it was seated at the right hand of God, Luther correctly replied that the right hand of God is everywhere. It would probably therefore be more in keeping with the biblical imagery if we would visualize Jesus as rising only a short distance above the heads of his disciples with the cloud coming there to render him invisible. Thus, when he ascended he was still near them.

“It is thus perhaps more in keeping with the words of the Bible to think of heaven not as a place far beyond the stars but simply as another realm of existence or another dimension of being. We are told, for example, that the holy angels always behold the face of the Father in heaven. Yet we know that the angels are with us here on earth. Wherever an angel goes, he can still see the face of God; the beatific vision never comes to an end for him. He is always in heaven even when he is here with us on earth.

“And when we die we will also not need to travel long distances to behold the face of God. He is here in this room with us, and all that is necessary is that we acquire the kind of eyesight that makes him visible to us. In that instant we will be in heaven and see him as he is. The curtain that hid him from our eyes will be lifted, and perhaps behind us the curtain will go down, cutting us off from all the miseries and uncertainties that plagued us here.”

That’s a more accurate picture of what happened at Jesus’ ascension. He is always with us. We are never far from his presence while we are in this world. And that gives us tremendous comfort and power as we witness for Christ. Jesus has called us to be part of an inspiring ministry we call evangelism. Evangelism is this idea that we have good news to share and we’re not going to wait for people to come to us before we share it. We must go out to meet people where they are. Like Jesus, who had most of his religious conversations outside of the Temple, we hit the streets with a faith that wants to reach where people are in this world. Instead of using social media as a gossip tool, we use it as an evangelism tool. Instead of using the internet for selfish pleasure, we use it for constructive witness. Work takes us to downtown Phoenix. Friends live in Mesa. Neighbors are in Tempe or Laveen. We all have different ways to come into contact with people, but our biggest and most exciting purpose is the same: To be Christ’s witnesses and share our faith.

Friends, when you and I do the same thing, our faith is transformed. Sharing your beliefs is one of the most effective ways to boost the excitement level for your faith. When you keep on talking about God, you’ll find yourself wanting to be in Bible class looking for the answers. When you share your faith, you’ll pray fervently for people you meet. If that weren’t enough, you’ll also connect with the joys and struggles of the Bible. You’ll know how Paul felt when that unbelieving jailor first heard the gospel and believed. You’ll understand how heartbroken Jesus was when his own relatives rejected his message. You will find that songs have more meaning, sermons give strength you need, and fellowship is so much more than coffee and a donut. It’s mutual encouragement as we together fight the good fight of the faith.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are links between our ascended Lord and a world that is dying to hear a life-changing message. And your role is not just inspiring, it is necessary. We as Christians are the only plan the Lord Jesus has in getting people connected to him. He doesn’t use the angels. He isn’t visibly walking on the earth teaching people. He uses us. You and me, ordinary people doing his extraordinary mission work. How can we do this? We have an ascended Lord who is busily at work making sure that people come in contact with us so that we can be Christ’s witnesses. We have an ascended Lord who is with us in every moment of our lives. We have an ascended Lord who has prepared a mansion for us in heaven.

So I encourage you to challenge yourself. Put yourself in uncomfortable situations for the sake people. Stick your neck out for someone else. Be different and lovingly let others know why you are different. You belong to Christ. It’s okay. Christ has your back. He won’t leave you. Witness in view of Christ’s ascension. Amen.