

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Ascension and Confirmation

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Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft

This isn't goodbye

—Luke 24:44-53

44 He said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to 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." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. 46 He said to them, "This is what is written and so it must be: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 Look, I am sending you what my Father promised. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." 50 He led them out as far as the vicinity of Bethany. He lifted up his hands and blessed them. 51 And while he was blessing them, he parted from them and was taken up into heaven. 52 So they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 They were continually in the temple courts, praising and blessing God. Amen.

What's your favorite way to say goodbye? Growing up in the Midwest, we were familiar with a long, drawn-out sort of goodbye. It was usually an additional conversation. Maybe an encouragement to watch out for deer too. As kids, we did not like the Midwest Goodbye. Maybe you are a fan of the Irish Goodbye. The Irish Goodbye is the practice of leaving a social function without telling anyone that you are leaving. For the shy and tired among us, this may be a preferred way to say goodbye. Maybe the linguists or world travelers among us like to throw in an 'adios,' 'ciao,' or 'au revoir.' There are many ways to say goodbye. The word itself comes from a merging of the term 'God be with you.' No matter what you say or how you say it, goodbye means that you will not be with someone any longer. You are leaving and you will no longer be together.

Our dual focus for today could seem like 'goodbye.' It could seem like Jesus said goodbye to his disciples. Right? He was no longer going to be with them in the way he was for the past three years. It could seem like we are saying goodbye to the confirmation class of 2023. Right? They are no longer going to be in intensive instruction with me. Also, middle school graduation is just around the corner. Yet, **this isn't goodbye**. Confirmands, today we aren't saying goodbye to you. You aren't saying goodbye to us. All Christians, Jesus ascended into heaven, but he wasn't saying goodbye either. **This isn't goodbye.**

Today, we pick up at the end of Luke's Gospel. During Jesus' final days with the disciples, he was preparing them for his eventual departure. Before Jesus' death and resurrection, he was physically and locally with his disciples constantly. He traveled with them. He celebrated special occasions with them. He was there with them locally. After his resurrection, Jesus was not always physically with his disciples. He would appear in a room. Then, he would leave. Jesus was preparing them for a time in which he wouldn't be there walking with them, eating with them, and doing all these things in the same way. Jesus prepared his disciples for his eventual departure by teaching them, giving them a promise, and blessing them.

First, Jesus taught his disciples. Jesus taught them the truth that all Scriptures were fulfilled in him. He opened their minds to understand this. As Jesus took them through this message, he shared with them the basic truths of the Christian faith: Christ suffered, died, and rose, and repentance and the forgiveness of sins were preached in him to all. In this instruction, he reminded them that they were witnesses of the truth. In Jesus' teaching, he prepared his disciples for his departure by teaching them these basic Christian truths. Jesus' teaching showed what we would call the Christocentricity of the Bible. All the Scriptures point to the truth of salvation in Jesus. Jesus' teaching also showed what the purpose of the church is. The purpose of the church is to proclaim these truths to all nations.

After Jesus taught his disciples to prepare them for his departure, he gave them a promise. He promised that he would send them what the Father had promised. They were to stay in Jerusalem until they received power from on high. Jesus was talking about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. This promise would be fulfilled on Pentecost.

Next, Jesus blessed his disciples. 40 days after his resurrection Jesus took them out to Bethany. There, Jesus lifted his hands and spoke a blessing upon them. It is good to note here that God's blessing is not just a pious wish. Jesus wasn't just saying nice words to them. Jesus' blessing was powerful for them.

As Jesus was blessing his disciples, he ascended into the sky and then was taken into heaven. Here, it is important to note what Jesus' ascension means. Jesus ascended into heaven, but why? What does Jesus' ascension mean? **This isn't**

goodbye. The ascension of Jesus wasn't a time to be sad. It wasn't time to say goodbye to a beloved friend. Instead, the ascension of Jesus is a celebration of wonderful comfort. While Jesus walked this earth, he did not make full and frequent use of his divine power. While Jesus walked this earth, he was only physically present at one location. Now that Jesus has ascended as God-man, we know that he is seated at the right hand of the Father. This is a position of authority, not a location. Jesus rules over everything for his Church. He does so with absolute authority and power. This is as Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:19-22, "19and just how surpassingly great his power is for us who believe. 20It is as great as the working of his mighty strength, which God worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion, and above every name that is given, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22God also placed all things under his feet and made him head over everything for the church." (EHV) Paul also continues to talk about how Jesus fills everything. Paul wrote, "The church is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way." (Ephesians 1:23 EHV) Now, the God-man, our Savior Jesus is everywhere. So, what is the comfort of this? Jesus is not bound to be in one place at a time. Instead, Jesus is everywhere. Also, Jesus is always present with his disciples as he promised them. This is as he said, "And surely I am with you always until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20 EHV) So, the ascension is a time of wonderful comfort. Jesus ascended to his position of power and authority. Now Jesus is always present with his people.

After Jesus' ascension, the disciples did the most obvious thing for Christians to do in the face of everything. They worshiped Jesus. There in Bethany, they worshiped Jesus. Then, they returned to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, they continually went to the location of public worship of God. Their response to Jesus' departure, which wasn't a goodbye, was to continually worship and bless God.

Sometimes, when a person departs from this earth. Loved ones will comfort each other with things that sound nice, but just aren't true. For example, when grandma dies, people may say things like "This isn't goodbye, grandma is still with us in spirit." Or "This isn't goodbye, grandma is watching over us from heaven." Or "This isn't goodbye, grandma remains with you in memory." These niceties don't give any real comfort. Grandma's soul does not remain with us on Earth. Grandma watching over you from heaven isn't true and shouldn't give comfort. Grandma's memories are not the same as the real person. When you lose a person in this life, the loss is real. The loneliness is real. The pain is real. We should acknowledge it.

Yet, Jesus' ascension is not the same thing. We can truthfully say **this isn't goodbye.** Jesus ascended to his position of authority. Jesus rules over everything for the good of his church. Jesus is present everywhere and fills everything. Jesus promised to remain with his church. Jesus' ascension truly isn't goodbye.

If this were goodbye, how would people respond? How would people respond if Jesus were truly gone forever? Well, they would likely be terrified. They would likely persist in sin. They would likely pursue other saviors like politicians and money. You can imagine how people would respond if this were goodbye.

Yet, **this isn't goodbye.** Jesus is not gone. Jesus is here. Jesus is present with us right now. Jesus rules all things for our good. So, how do we respond to these ascension truths? Do we act like people terrified of tomorrow? We are so scared of the sinful immorality of the world, LGBT pushing TV shows and companies, that we shrivel up. Do we demonstrate trust that Jesus reigns in response to that? Or consider how we conduct our lives. Do we live as people that know Jesus is always present with us? Instead, maybe we get caught up in sin thinking we are all alone. Maybe we feel immense loneliness not trusting that Jesus is truly with us. Or do we act like Jesus is gone and we, therefore, need another Savior? We see the problems of this world, so we look for the next politician, policy, or dollar to make everything right for us. Do we live as people who know the comfort of the ascension? Or do we live as people who think we had to say goodbye to Jesus?

If we have acted as those who have said goodbye to Jesus, then we must repent of that sin. We must confess to our Lord this sin. Then, we can hear Jesus' message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Listen to what your Ascended Lord said, "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 from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." Jesus Christ did suffer and die for your sins. Jesus also rose victoriously from the grave. Now, this message is preached to you. Your sins are all forgiven in Jesus. You have eternal life. The Jesus who ascended into heaven is preparing a place for you. One day he will take you to be with him in the heavenly mansion. This is your confidence in death. Your confidence is that Jesus didn't say goodbye. Jesus is with you now. Jesus rules over you now.

So, what is our natural response to these wonderful truths? Well, we can live as people without fear who know that Jesus is with us and rules all things. We can also look to Jesus' disciples as our examples. After Jesus ascended, they

worshiped him. Then, they went to the place of public worship to continue worshiping God. This can be our response. Let's worship God with our lives outside of church. Then, let's continue to come here to the house of public worship.

Dear confirmands, **this isn't goodbye**. Jesus didn't say goodbye to you. Please do not say goodbye to him. Instead, take seriously the vows that you are about to make. These vows are a promise that you are making to your Ascended Lord. After you make these vows, come back to church. Come back to church every Sunday. There, you will be strengthened by your Ascended Lord. He will be present with you and all believers. He will come to you through his Word. He will strengthen you when you eat his true body and drink his true blood. Continue to come here as your response to the comfort that Jesus gives in the gospel and his ascension. Amen.