



HE'S GONE! NOW WHAT?

Grace/Caminando con Jesús Lutheran Church

Easter 7 (B)
[Ascension]

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SERMON TEXT

Acts 1:1-11

✝ IN NOMINE JESU ✝

Are you happy? ...

As we celebrate Ascension Day and think about what that means for our dear Savior, I think we would all say we sure are happy for him! Having completed his Father's mission of redeeming the world and reconciling it to God, God's one and only Son, as true man, is exalted to his rightful place in the universe—the right hand of God, the position of total power and glory and absolute supremacy. Who can even begin to imagine the sublime glory and the praises he is receiving from countless saints and angels, as we speak? When we think about that, when we think about what Jesus, our Jesus, is enjoying right now, well, how can we be anything but happy for him?

But, are you happy for *you*? If the thoughtful pause, the timid nod, the Yeah-I-guess-so shrug is any indication, the answer for most of us is Yes and No. As we think about some of the good things in our lives or good things happening to us we can say, Sure, I'm happy. But, then again, living as sin-corrupted people on this sin-infected planet that question instantly brings to mind plenty of things in our lives that we're not happy about, that make us feel sad, afraid, anxious, frustrated. And so, while we are happy for Jesus, until we are in heaven and see him face to face, we are sure to experience the same longing and heaviness of heart that a widow experiences, that the disciples may have experienced as they stood on that hill squinting up at their Lord, as he slipped through the clouds—***He's Gone! Now What?***

Thankfully, dear people, what was true of Easter is true of Ascension. When the reality and significance of Easter finally dawned on the disciples, it wiped away their tears, evaporated their fears, and filled them with a great and inexpressible joy that propelled their lives and mission. And so, my aim today is this: to use Jesus' ascension to once and for all answer the longing of our heart to see Jesus in the flesh—***He's Gone! Now What?***

1. Concentrate!

So, now what? What are we to do now that Jesus is gone, out of sight? When we look at the opening verses of Acts the first answer and direction that comes to us is this: *concentrate*, concentrate on the word and promises of Jesus! Look again at v. 3 of our text. Luke tells us:

After his suffering, he [Jesus] presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

Notice how when Jesus appeared to his disciples in the forty day period between Easter and Ascension, he didn't do it just to drop in for a quick hello. He did it to provide convincing confirmations that he was alive *and* to speak to them about what —“**about the kingdom of God.**” In other words, Jesus appeared to his disciples to draw their attention to the Old Testament promises of his kingship and kingdom that he fulfilled for them by his life, death, and resurrection.

And look at the Ascension itself. How much time does the ascended Lord give his disciples to stay there just staring up into space? Was it even a second? No sooner is he out of sight, when two angels appear and break his disciples' nostalgic gaze into space:

Whew-whew! (snap* snap*) **'Men of Galilee...why do you stand here looking into the sky?'**

Then pay close attention to what the angels' said:

This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back..."

What is that? Isn't that basically a repeating and rephrasing of Jesus' promise on Maundy Thursday, "In my Father's house are many rooms. I am going 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..." (Jn 14:2,3).

He's gone! Now what? Can it be any clearer? *Concentrate!* Concentrate on Jesus' word! That's what! Concentrate on everything he spoke to you and everything he has done and still does for you that the inspired prophets and apostles recorded on the pages of the Bible! Concentrate on the promises imbedded in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit spoken over you in baptism—the Father who was not *your* Father by birth now is by your rebirth. The Son, his one and only Son, was what God was willing to give up for you that you might be his child and heir. The Holy Spirit is the one who has made you a child of God and heir by giving you faith in Jesus. Concentrate on the promises of our Savior's Supper—Take and eat! Take and drink! My body and blood shed *for you* for the forgiveness of sins.

Concentrate on God's word and promises all the days of your life! That call and imperative of the Ascension could not be any clearer! It could not be more important either! Just consider the mission Jesus has for you and me—"You will be my **witnesses...**" But how will we ever be that? You know as well as I do that neither our world nor society is interested, let alone eager, to hear our witness of Jesus. In fact, they're only too eager to ridicule, reject, and persecute us for daring to be

witnesses of the risen and ascended Lord! Ask an Egyptian Christian about that! Ask a Christian young person who comes from a family of unbelievers about that! I once knew of a young man who attended the Christian Day School of my home congregation of North Hollywood—St. Paul’s First. His family sent him there for the quality *academic* education not the quality *Christian* education. So when he was scheduled to acolyte (which he loved to do out of love for his Savior) he had to walk miles to church, because his parents wouldn’t drive him. Being a witness of Jesus requires sacrifice. It requires sacrifice of time, of money, of energy, of comfort, and popularity, even of the love of those closest to you! Who naturally has the courage and desire to make such sacrifices? Who is even competent for such a task as witnessing to Jesus? None of us! Paul tells us that. The only way, then, for us to be the witnesses Jesus called us to be is to focus on the good news of him in Word and sacrament, because that is the vehicle the Holy Spirit rides to come to us and that is the generator and fuel the Holy Spirit uses to empower our faith!

Focus on Jesus’ word and promises is a critical imperative to heed also from the perspective of our natural propensity to be stuck in old ways and thinking! We see this great weakness of ours in the question the disciples asked Jesus in our text—

Lord, are you at *this* time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

How terribly sad and dull of them! Just think, after three years of Jesus telling them and illustrating for them by parable what he told Pilate on Good Friday—“My kingdom is *not* of this world”—after rising from the dead and coming to them and speaking to them about the kingdom of God and making clear what that kingdom was all about—“repentance and forgiveness of sins being preached in his name to all nations,” they still have *old* notions of Christ and his kingdom being, at least in part, a

glorious earthly king and kingdom for the nation of Israel! How can that be? Oh, you know! That should come as no surprise to any of us. Even now after Jesus has ascended and the Holy Spirit has come to us post-Pentecost who of us doesn't still struggle with *old* sinful thoughts - Who of us doesn't struggle with old selfish ways— "What about *me*? It's like the old Beatles song, "We Can Work It Out." The song is about a man whose fighting with his girl and they're about to split up. What's his solution to try to mend the relationship and restore their love —"Try to see it *my* way."—That's the incessant cry in the natural heart of us all! Who of us doesn't still struggle with old questions beyond our control—"Why me? Why did I do that? Why didn't I say this, then?" What is the only but sure thing that will overcome that? What alone will enable us to overcome the old, self-centered, god-complexed self and be in practice the new creations that Jesus made us to be by faith in him, new creations that think and carry out the stunningly beautiful new thoughts—"Let me see it your way" and as the psalmists sing —"God gives me my days of gladness, and I will Trust him still When he sends me sadness"? What will enable that? The good news of Jesus in Word and sacraments. That and that alone!

So, my dear ones concentrate on the significance of your Savior's ascension. Keep in mind what Jesus' ascension means: it means that he first *descended* from heaven through the womb of a teenage virgin and successfully constructed your heavenly mansion by being born into a manger made of wood and nails, living a lifetime of sinless perfection for you, then taking up the wood and nails of Calvary's cross with his carpenter hands and wiping away from your record all of your sinful weakness, so that you live every second on earth beneath God's favor and blessing! Jesus' ascension means you will never be orphaned and your mission will always succeed, because by his ascension Jesus is keeping his promise to be with you always and

everywhere to the very end of the age and to send us the Holy Spirit to ensure that we remain dear sheep of his and that we receive fresh supplies of power each day to be the witnesses our Savior called us to be. Jesus ascension to God's right hand "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion," means we will survive and thrive, even as sinners in a fallen world, and we will make it to heaven. It means all that because Jesus' ascension assures us that all things are subject to him, and he rules as King over all *for you and me*, his body, his bride, his love to ensure that when he returns he gets to take us to the unimaginable and eternal delights and glory he now enjoys!

2. Celebrate!

Concentrate on your Savior's ascension and all it means, dear people, and in the joy and consolation, the peace and comfort, the courage and power it gives you, now what? *Now what?* Now, *celebrate!* Celebrate the ascension with all that is in you, with all of the enthusiasm and joy the Holy Spirit gives you!

How should you celebrate! First, bask in the joy and comfort of the ascension. Tell yourself, "I am a sinner by birth and by occupation, and I'm good at my job. I have not done all things well. I have many things that I am sorry for; I have my share of regrets. But, I will not hang my head! I will not mope! I will lift my head high and face each day, each moment with a clean conscience. I will, because my Savior has ascended, and I know what that means: he accomplished his mission to forgive and purify me! And the last and lasting picture that he gave me to engrave in my memory is him lifted up above me with his pierced hands outstretched in blessing, and I know what he's saying to me—Because of what I have done for you, you are under my constant blessing and the constant favor of holy God!

Tell yourself, "Yesterday had its share of the consequences of sin—hardships and disappointments, hurts and ills, fears and worries, enemies and broken dreams, tears and losses, unfinished errands and toilsome, unfulfilling, sub-par work. Today and tomorrow will have more of the same. But I will not fear! I will not complain or feel sorry for myself either! I will live each day, each moment with great joy and gratitude in my heart to God! I will because I have a living and ascended Lord who is with me, who holds me in the palm of his pierced hand and brings me close to his chest, who blesses me in everything, who endows me with his Spirit to be the child of God and witness to him he called me to be, who will deliver me from all woe and heartache and enemy, and will one day swoop down from heaven, lift me and my loved ones who died in him up from the grave, carry me across the threshold of the heavenly home he prepared for me and wipe away every tear from my eye!

Yes, now that Jesus is gone celebrate his ascension like that and then celebrate by striving to obey his great new command—to love each other as he loved you—and to do your part to be his witness by your daily prayers, your faithful offerings, your helping out at church, your speaking of him and inviting friends, neighbors, loved ones and love interests to church!

On our way to glory there will be plenty of times when we cry in pain or worry, ***He's Gone! Now What?*** Thankfully, Jesus' ascension has given us our answer: Now what? Now, *concentrate!* Concentrate on his word! Now, *celebrate!* Celebrate by basking in the great comforts of the ascension and by being the followers and witnesses of him he called you to be. Now, concentrate! Now, celebrate! And await with eagerness what comes next—being happy forever! Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

