

Rev. Danny Mackey
Ascension of Our Lord (Observed)
May 13, 2018
Mark 16:14-20
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

He is risen! [He is risen, indeed!] Alleluia!

So then the Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.

Where do you go to find God? The Christian knows. You go to Jesus. It's only through Jesus that we can pray to God the Father and that we are confident in our prayers. As we preached, Jesus is our Amen. We find God when we find Jesus. So we ask, "Where do you go to find Jesus?"

Now, we're immediately faced with a mystery. It appears as if Jesus is gone from us. He went up into the sky until a cloud hid Him from sight. He talked about going away, and then He went away, promising to return. He said that if He didn't go away, the Helper wouldn't come. So it appears as if Jesus is gone from us and that He is absent, somewhere else.

On the other hand, Jesus promised His disciples that He would never leave them. He said, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). He said, "For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them" (Mt 18:20). Because we have heard—though we have not seen—we know that Jesus is present with His Church, not absent from His Church.

How can this be? How can He leave and yet not leave? How can He talk about being present with His Church while at the same time He talks about leaving and coming back? St. Paul explained it this way in his Epistle to the Ephesians. In discussing how God the Father raised His Son from the dead Paul wrote:

He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And He put all things under His feet and gave Him as head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Eph 1:20-23).

We shouldn't expect to see Jesus walking the streets of Palestine as He did nearly two thousand years ago. Still, He is present with us. He didn't ascend into heaven to be absent from His Church. He ascended in order to fill all things so that He could be present with His Church everywhere at all times. Now this is a wonderful mystery. Jesus isn't limited by

space and time as we are. He can be and is present in various different places at the same time. He ascended into heaven and is even now at the right hand of the Father.

The “right hand of God” isn’t a geographical location millions of miles away from us. It’s not as if Jesus is stuck somewhere else, absent from His Church, where He sits on a throne and thinks about us. Or that He watches us from afar maybe on a giant monitor that shows Him what’s going on here on earth. No, Jesus is here. The “right hand of God” is a figure of speech; it means Jesus has equal power and authority to God the Father. It means that He who was humbled is humbled no more. He lives to rule over His Church, and He does so. When we call Christ’s ascension into heaven and His session at the right hand of God a mystery, we are using a biblical term. St. Paul wrote about the mysteries of the faith. In 1 Timothy 3:16 he wrote,

Great, indeed, we confess is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

It’s called a mystery because no human mind can fully understand it. We simply believe it because God Himself reveals it. In 1 Corinthians 4:1, St. Paul refers to pastors as “stewards of the mysteries of God.” Our job is not to figure out these mysteries but to teach them, to place them before God’s people as clearly as we can.

How the mysteries of God can be true only God knows. How can Jesus be present with us here at Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie and at the same time be present with Christians on the other side of the world? I don’t know.

John Calvin, the famous Swiss theologian and the father of the Reformed churches, figured out that Jesus wasn’t really present with His Church. Calvin was quite bright. He was familiar with the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. Aristotle had shown that the finite could not contain the infinite. That’s the kind of thing people think about when they don’t have enough work to do. At any rate, John Calvin agreed that the finite could not contain the infinite, so he concluded that since man is finite and only God is infinite, that Jesus was present with His Church only according to His divine, godly nature.

Christ’s human nature, according to Calvin, was finite. He couldn’t be in more than one place at one time. So Calvin insisted that the “right hand of God” was a place far away from us. Jesus in His human nature was absent from His Church, according to Calvin.

Calvin's teaching is very reasonable. Calvin's teaching is also very wrong. Reasonableness might be a good way to judge politics, law or even ethics. It's a very poor way to judge theology. We Christians must daily confess that our own human reason is completely corrupted and stained by sin. We need to submit humbly to the Word of God even when it teaches us things that are completely unreasonable. Calvin's highly educated human reason led him to deny that the bread of the Lord's Supper really is Christ's body. After all, a human body is finite and can't be at more than one place at the same time. So says Aristotle. So says human reason. So says John Calvin and his disciples. So say most Protestants who follow the same reasoning as John Calvin did.

But God says something quite different. God promises that Jesus—true God and true man—remains present with His Church as He promised. Jesus is not absent; Jesus is present. The whole Jesus, in both His divine and His human natures, is present wherever His Gospel is proclaimed and wherever His sacraments are rightly administered. Let human reason whine and complain about how it can't understand this. Faith believes it because God says it.

This truth is important. It's not a mere theological detail. Jesus, our God and our brother, is here...with us...right now. He's here in this room. But how often do we talk as if this just isn't so? We talk about Jesus in the past tense, as if He isn't here anymore, as if Jesus' ascension into heaven was His way of avoiding us for a couple of thousand years. But nothing could be further from the truth! It is the ascended Jesus who rules over His Church on earth through His holy Gospel. You hear a minister talk; but it's Jesus who gives the Gospel to you and assures you that He loves you, has suffered for you and lives to intercede for you. You listen to a man's words; but it's Jesus who baptizes the baby, and it's Jesus who gives His people to eat and to drink of His body and blood for the full and free forgiveness of all their sins.

When you pray in Jesus' name, when you suffer losses nobody can understand, you need to remember this precious mystery: Jesus is present with you. As both true God and true man, Jesus is present with you. As your God who can do anything you ask, Jesus is present with you. As your brother who has felt all of your pain, Jesus is present with you. With so much talk these days about compassion and true empathy, that is, the ability to feel the suffering of another, only Jesus who truly knows what you suffer. Do you face temptation?

He faced the same temptation. Do you suffer from guilt? He who bore the sins of all people felt the guilt of all those sins. Do you wonder if anybody in this world can understand specifically what troubles you? He can, and He does. He can as the all-knowing God who made you. He can as your dear brother who took your place and suffered everything you have ever suffered and more.

This is the Jesus who is here with us whenever we gather in His name. St. Paul said it so plainly in 1 Timothy 1:15, "This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." Yes, and He still does! He still saves sinners right here in this world. And this is how He rules over us: with His death and resurrection. He assumes His full authority as the Son of God and Savior of the world. Jesus reigns. Jesus is Lord. Jesus governs His Church.

But pay close attention. Watch how He does it. He serves us. He speaks kindly to us. He continually takes off our burdened souls the sin that would drive us away in despair. He is present in His Gospel to do that. He continually washes our guilty conscience clean. He is present in our Baptism to do that. He continually feeds us with His precious body and blood. He is present in His Holy Supper to do that. He never stops interceding for us before the throne of God's grace. This is what Jesus does, and this is what His ascension means. This is what the Bible teaches us when it speaks of Christ sitting at the right hand of God the Father.

In His name.

He is risen! [He is risen, indeed!] Alleluia!