

He Ascended into Heaven...

This Sunday, May 21, is the Observance of the Ascension of our Lord. It is not called the Festival or the Feast of the Ascension; or even Ascension Day because it was 40 days from the day Christ arose from the grave that he ascended into heaven; and because Easter is a Sunday, 40 days later is always a Thursday by our modern calendar. Thus, we observe the Ascension of our Lord this Sunday—the closest Sunday to Ascension Day which falls on May 18th this year. Ascension Day celebrates Christ's exaltation. While on earth, He was a servant. Now in heaven, He is the ruler and Lord of all. By entering heaven as the representative of mankind, He completed the work of our salvation and guarantees the eventual glorification of all who love Him. Just as Jesus went up in the clouds, He will return the same way. St. Luke, the author of the book of Acts in the New Testament, described the scene in Acts 1: 9-11: 9 *“And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”*

In the days following Christ's resurrection He was with the disciples continuing to speak about the kingdom of God and they asked him: *“Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and to the end of the earth. And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”*(Acts 1:4-9)

Every Sunday, in confessing our faith in either the Nicene or the Apostles' creed, we say “He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty”. And thus, every Sunday we reaffirm the power and blessings of Christ's Ascension.

The ascended and enthroned Christ pours out his Spirit on the church. Jesus himself had told his disciples that it was good for him to go away, because only then would he send them another Helper, the Spirit of truth, the Comforter. And that's exactly what happened on the Day of Pentecost, ten days after Jesus' ascension. The Holy Spirit descended on the church with power, inaugurating a new age in the history of salvation.

The ascended and enthroned Christ applies the blessings of salvation. Having accomplished redemption through his suffering on the cross, the risen and exalted Christ now applies the salvation he has won, by granting the gifts of repentance and forgiveness of sins.

The ascended and enthroned Christ cares for his suffering people as they bear witness to him. We heard about this a few weeks ago when we read the account of Stephen, one of the Seven Deacons of the early church and the first Christian martyr. *“But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”* (Acts 7:55–56)

All of this should give us great encouragement! When feeling weak in ourselves, Luke reminds us that the exalted Christ has given us his Spirit, who equips us with the power, boldness, and courage we need to accomplish our mission. This is the great hope of all Christians. For just as Jesus went into heaven, so will all Christians. Those who are dead will rise first; those who are living will be caught up to meet Him. With this hope in mind, we say, as part of the Holy Communion liturgy, Amen, "Come Lord Jesus."

Come and celebrate Christ's Ascension and all the joy it brings to you. You are forgiven. Amen.