**Ascension Day Service – 5/25/2017**

**REJOICE! CHRIST** **ASCENDED TO THE FATHER”S RIGHT HAND**

Luke 24:50-53

Certain dates in history have served as milestones, marking the beginning of whole new eras of time. In 1942, for example, the first atomic reaction was set off at the University of Chicago, and like it or not, the Atomic Age began. In 1957 the Space Age began when the Russians launched Sputnik 1. Today we commemorate the date which signaled the BEGINNING OF THE END – the last days of the world were beginning. With the Ascension of Jesus this world entered its final era. The Messiah’s first coming was done. The next great event to happen will be his Second Coming at the end of this world.

It was 40 days after Easter. For over a month now Jesus had been appearing to his followers at various places and times ‑‑ to show them that he had indeed risen. In all, the Bible tells us of about a dozen appearances, including one time when he was seen by more than 500 people at once. Very likely Jesus appeared other times also which haven't been recorded for us. Now Jesus led his disciples out to a mountaintop near Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. There while the disciples stood watching, Jesus was visibly lifted up and rose higher and higher until a cloud came and covered him from view. Jesus had ascended!

The word “ascend” actually has a double meaning. We speak of a “balloon ascending.” By that we mean that it GOES UP into the sky. “Go up” is one meaning of ascend, and indeed before the disciples’ eyes Jesus WENT UP on Ascension Day. But we also speak of a king “ascending to the throne.” When a reigning king or queen dies, the next in line ascends to the throne, we say. By this we mean, the heir now claims his throne. He receives the crown, that is, the authority and the honor of king. On Ascension Day, Jesus ascended to the throne of God the Father to claim the rule of this world.

 **REJOICE! CHRIST** **ASCENDED TO THE FATHER”S RIGHT HAND. Our Savior went home in victory. He now rules for us. He will come back to get us.**

I.

Jesus' Ascension signals for us Christ's return to Heaven in victory. Do you remember the angel’s words to Joseph before Jesus was born? The angel said: *"You shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save its people from their sins"* (Mt 1:21). Well, now 33 years later, it HAD been done. Jesus had SAVED HIS PEOPLE ‑‑ ALL THE PEOPLE OF THE WORLD. He had died on the cross for the sins of the world and then rose on Easter to show that we have been justified. The sins and guilt of the whole world had been paid for! Our rescue is won! Christ's work is finished! The Father welcomes home the conquering hero.

Jesus ascended not just into Heaven, but to a very special place there. He ascended to sit at God's right hand. God the Father *"seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come*" (Eph 1:20‑21). The right hand of the Father is not specifically a place, as if somewhere in Heaven right now God is sitting and Jesus has a chair next to him on his right‑hand side. That can't be it because God is a spirit and is present everywhere. He is not limited to one throne up there somewhere. The right hand of God is a status rather. Etiquette says that the right-hand side is the side of honor. The woman walks on the man’s right side. The guest of honor sits at the king’s right at a formal banquet. When someone talks about the boss’ right‑hand man, this expression implies authority to speak and act on the boss’ behalf. The right hand of God is the status of greatest honor and power in Heaven. Jesus returned to the same divine glory and power he had before he left Heaven to be born a man at the first Christmas.

II.

When Christ returned to Heaven in victory, the Father handed over to him the rule of this world. The Father said to his victorious, heroic son: “My son, you rule over the universe. I place everything under your control." That was what Jesus meant when he said to his disciples before he left this world: *“All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth"* (Mt 28:18). The Father delegated primary authority to the Son to guide and rule this world until the end of time. Christ had shown great power while on earth through his miracles ‑‑ now in Heaven, to an even greater degree, his power is unlimited and unrestrained. *"God has put everything under his feet,"* it says in Corinthians. Peter agrees with Paul: *"Christ is gone into heaven and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him”* (I Pe 3:22).

A young woman went away to college and left her houseplants and her goldfish in the care of her *mother, who had a tendency to be forgetful. Within a month the plants had all died, and the* mother apologetically wrote to tell the bad news. When the daughter called a week later, her mother confessed that all the goldfish had died, too. There was a long pause, then in a fearful voice the girl asked: “How’s dad?”

 I am glad that mother is not in charge of the universe. I am glad I am not in charge of this universe – no offense, but I am glad that you’re not either. I am glad that Jesus ascended and now rules everything. In this world of confusion things don’t always “add up” or “make sense” to us. But we can be sure that they do make sense because Jesus governs all things by his almighty power.

Ever since his ascension to the right hand of the Father, Christ has been guiding his church in its battle against the enemies of Christ and his Gospel. In this way Christ is continually winning battles ‑‑ as souls are continually being brought to faith and delivered from Satan's grasp. In spite of the continued opposition of the Devil, the sinful world around us, and our own sinful selves, Christ will continue to lead souls to spiritual, eternal victory. In the last days, evil will run wild, but it is just one final fling before the ultimate triumph of Christ. Christ's enemies still have some power. Death, for example, which came into this world because of sin ‑‑ death still claims all people, Christians too. But Christ has shown us that death is as good as dead. Its sting is gone already for the Christian; it is only sleep for us. Ultimately death will betotally conquered. For Christ must rule until he has defeated all his enemies ‑‑ every authority, power or might.

Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father and now is head over everything for the church. That means that right now he rules over everything in our personal lives too. And he accomplishes good through us. Paul tells the Ephesians and us: *“We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"* (2:10). God has prepared in advance a life of good works for each of us to live. He guides us along that path and produces the good results he wants to come from our efforts.

III.

Christ now rules everything for us. This is our blessing because of Christ’s ascension. There is also a second blessing. Jesus ascended to Heaven in order to prepare for his second coming to earth. At the Ascension, after Jesus was gone from sight, two angels, dressed in white, appeared and said to the disciples: *“Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into Heaven"* (11). Jesus will return from Heaven visibly. He will return to take us to Heaven to be with him there. Jesus said it so beautifully when he told the disciples: *“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 again, and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am"* (Jo 14:2‑3).

Jesus had predicted his ascension, and on Ascension Day his prophecy was shown to be true. In just this way, all Jesus says is true, and we can put our full confidence in it. He said: *“I am the way, the truth and the life,"* and he is! He says that *“in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who are the called according to his purpose"* (Rom 8:28), and he does! He said he will come back to take us into Heaven to be with him, and he will! We can be sure of it, for Jesus’ ascension proved that the Father approved of all which Jesus had done and said.

The Ascension meant that Jesus had departed. He would not be seen by his disciples here on earth again. Only someone who is extremely morbid would be happy when a close friend leaves for good. The Ascension would, therefore, seem to be a time of real sorrow for the disciples and for us. NOT SO!

In the year 325, representatives of Christian churches throughout the world met at Nicea. The Nicene Creed is the most well‑known product of that church council. The council issued another edict, however. It decreed that no kneeling would be allowed in the Ascension/Pentecost season of the church year. Kneeling denotes humility and sorrow over one's sins. But Ascension Day is not a time for sorrow. This is a season for joyful celebration.

It doesn't mean total separation from Christ at all. Only his visible stay on earth has now ended. Actually Jesus ascended to be closer to us. While he remained on earth, Jesus' human body was limited to one place at a time. But now from Heaven Jesus can be with all of us. That's the Ascension joy. JESUS IS WITH US!

The disciples misunderstood many things in those early days, but this is one thing they got right. The Bible tells us that *"They were continually in the Temple, praising and blessing God"* (Lk 24:52‑53). Theirs was the joy of men fully convinced that their Lord was truly risen from the dead and was taken up into glory. On their lips were constant hymns of praise and thanksgiving. They were bubbling with joy, eager to talk about the exciting events they had seen.

This Ascension joy is offered to us, too. Although we were not eyewitnesses of the Ascension, we have seen it just as clearly by the eyes of faith. The Bible says about our relationship to Christ: *"Though you have not seen him, you love him -- and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy"* (1 Pe 1:8). Our joy certainly will find expression too, as we regularly worship our Lord with hymns and praise, as we joyfully come to his house to study his Word and build up his kingdom.

Shepherds still graze their flocks of sheep and goats on the grassy slopes of Palestine. As they do, they still look down on the Sea of Galilee with its deep blue water. They still look beyond the sea to the rust-colored mountains. They still view scattered along the shoreline clusters of while buildings – towns where Jesus once walked. The whole scene must look much like it did when Jesus traveled through those hills with his disciples. If only we could have been there then and walked at his side. How fantastic they would have been!

But we now live in a land and at a time far removed from the time and place Jesus lived. We are not far removed from Jesus, however*. “He ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe,"* the Bible says (Eph 4:10). Jesus said the same thing: *"Lo, I am with you always."* Wherever we eat or sleep, work or play, Jesus is beside us. Palestine is only the place where he lived long ago. Today he lives wherever believers are found. He lives with us and in us to love and forgive, to help and care. Jesus will continue to live with us every moment until he comes again for us, so we can live with him forever in Heaven. Amen.