

*“While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven.”* That's how St. Luke records the Ascension of our Lord. He doesn't say, “Jesus left them while they were confused.” He doesn't say, “Jesus vanished while they stared into the clouds.” He doesn't say, “Jesus disappeared when His time was up.” No, he says, *“While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven.”*

Jesus left His disciples, and us, not with a command, not with a rebuke, not with a warning, not with empty silence, but with a blessing. And even as He was lifted up, He did not stop speaking it. Even as He was carried away, He did not withdraw His grace. He was lifted up to bless.

Jesus doesn't ascend into heaven to rest, retire, or retreat. He ascends to rule. He is enthroned at the right hand of God. The position of ultimate power and authority. All things are now placed under His feet. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. The One who once hung in weakness on the cross is now exalted in glory. The One who was judged by unjust men now judges the living and the dead. He ascends not to remove Himself from creation, but to take His place over it. He reigns not only as true God, but also as true man, our Brother, our Savior, our King.

And yet, before he takes this place of power, he lifts up his hands to bless us. That's not how we usually think about power. That's not how we usually think about kings or rulers or divine strength. We are trained by the world to think that distance means disinterest.

If someone rises above us, we assume they will leave us behind. If a boss climbs the corporate ladder, we expect them to forget our names. If a congressman gets elected, we expect them to serve their own interests or that of their donors, not the people who elected them. If a ruler is exalted, we assume they will rule over us, not for us. And so, it is tempting to think of Christ's Ascension the same way. He has gone up, so He must be far away. He must be busy with greater things. He must have left us to handle the rest.

And so, we live as though Jesus is no longer near. We live as though His mercy were past tense. When life is hard, we assume: “It's all up to me now. Jesus isn't here. I'm alone. I need to figure this out on my own.” We live as though as though the entire burden of this hard, complicated life of suffering and temptation is now ours and ours alone. And Jesus is merely a judge, coming back someday to see how good or bad a job we each did.

But Ascension Day proclaims otherwise. Ascension Day declares: He has not left to condemn, He has gone up to bless. He is not far away, He is seated at the right hand of the Father for you. He has not withdrawn, He has filled all things with His presence. He is not absent, He is ascended. And His ascension means mercy, not abandonment. It means blessing, not distance.

St. Luke tells us that Jesus lifted his hands in blessing. If you're not aware, that's the gesture of the priest. That is the sign of benediction. That's what the high priest would do after making the sin offering. That's what pastors still do at the end of the Divine Service. It's not just a ceremonial motion. It's a sign that peace has been declared, that grace is given, that sins are forgiven.

Jesus lifts His hands not to wave goodbye, but to declare peace. He is not merely departing. He is sending them into the world under His blessing. This is not the end. This is the beginning. The beginning of the Church's mission. And He begins this mission with his hands lifted in a blessing of grace.

Notice also: the disciples don't mourn. They don't despair. They don't say, “What now?” No, they worship Him. They return to Jerusalem with great joy. They are continually in the temple blessing God. Because they know that Christ's reign is not the end of His presence. It is the extension of His presence in a new and more powerful way. He is lifted up to bless.

St. Paul writes to the Ephesians and prays that they would understand “*what is the immeasurable greatness of [God’s] power toward us who believe.*” And what is that power? It is the power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated Him at God’s right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. It is the power that put all things under His feet and gave Him as head over all things to the Church, which is His Body.

Now pay attention to Paul’s language here. Christ is seated far above, but not for Himself. He is given to the Church. His power is toward us who believe. His rule is for the sake of His Body. He is lifted up to bless.

And this means that Christ’s ascension is not just a historical event. It is a present and active reality. Right now, at this moment, Christ is ruling over every nation, every angel, every demon, every tyrant, every storm, every sorrow, every cancer cell, every deathbed. And He is doing so for you. His rule is not distant. It is gracious. His power is not abstract. It is personal. He is head over all things for the Church. For you. And that means your life, your future, your salvation are in the hands of the Ascended Christ.

Hands that still bear the marks of the nails. When Jesus raised His hands in blessing, the disciples saw not only His power but also His love. They saw the wounds. They saw the scars. They saw the proof of what He was willing to suffer for them. The very hands lifted in blessing were the same hands pierced on the cross.

This was no distant king waving from a throne. This was their crucified and risen Lord, whose love had been engraved into His flesh. Every time He lifted His hands, He showed them the cost of their forgiveness. Every time He stretched them out, He reminded them, and us, what kind of King He is: the kind who dies for His people, the kind who blesses with wounded hands.

In Acts 1, St. Luke tells us what happened right before the Ascension. Jesus promised the disciples the Holy Spirit, and then He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. And the disciples just stood, staring in to heaven.

It's not that much different than what we do. In our prayers, in our worship, in our frustration. We look up to heaven like they did and we think, “But Jesus... I need you. Why aren't you here with me?” But then two angels appeared and said, “*Why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus... will come in the same way as you saw Him go.*”

And those are words of great comfort. The Jesus who went up is the Jesus who will come again. He is not changed. He is not diminished. He is not replaced. He is the same crucified, risen, and ascended Lord. And He is coming back. But in the meantime, He isn't missing, nor is He silent. He is still active: through His Spirit, through His Word, through His Church, through His Supper, through the forgiveness of sins.

The Ascension doesn't mean Christ has stopped working. It means He now works in all places and for all people. As Martin Luther once put it: “We believe that Christ... is put over all creatures and fills all things... he is a lord of all things, has all things in his hand, and is present everywhere.”

He has not withdrawn. He has filled all things. He has filled the baptismal font with His name. He has filled the bread and wine with His Body and Blood. He has filled my mouth, as your pastor, with words of absolution. He has filled the Scriptures with His voice. He has filled the Church with His mercy. And He has filled your future with hope. Because He was lifted up to bless.

You don't need to stare into the clouds. You don't need to strain your eyes to find Christ. You don't need to ascend to heaven to reach Him. He has come down to you. And now He reigns for you.

You are not forgotten. You are not alone. You are not left behind. Christ was lifted up not to escape from you, but to bless you with all things. Lift your eyes not to the sky, but to this altar, to this font, to the Word of God. There He is. There He reigns. There He still blesses.

And when He comes again, He will come in the same way you saw Him go: with blessing, with mercy, with hands still scarred out of love for you, and with a kingdom that will never end. Amen.