

## Devotion for May 5, 2016 - Ascension

Luke 24:50-53 (NIV84)

### Theme: Joy in Jesus' Ascension

<sup>50</sup> When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. <sup>52</sup> Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. <sup>53</sup> And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Did you notice something strange in this evening's sermon text? It says that, after seeing Jesus ascend into heaven, the disciples worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

Great joy? Doesn't that seem a little odd to you? I don't know about you but I always get choked up when family or friends leave after a visit - let alone move to some place where I rarely see them. If I were one of Jesus' first disciples, I could imagine myself being filled with sadness - not joy. Why? Because my dear friend and teacher is gone. Whom would I run to now with all my questions and problems? On top of this, I would feel a little fearful. Those same enemies who crucified Him were still in charge over Jerusalem and Judea. Who's to say that they wouldn't be looking to kill me too? And then there was his talk about me being his witness to the world. Would I be ready for such a task - after only three years of training?

Sad, alone and afraid: this is how I could imagine myself after seeing Jesus ascend into heaven; but the Bible tells us that this was not the case with the disciples. Joy replaced their sadness and courage replaced all fear. Why? Because they understood what Jesus' ascension meant. Let's consider this, under the theme: **Joy in Jesus' ascension.** 1) *It assures us that our sins are forgiven.* 2) *It assures us that Christ is in control.* 3) *It assures us that He is coming back.*

Part One: It assures us that our sins are forgiven.

You have probably heard it said that Jesus' resurrection is the clearest proof that our sins have been forgiven. While this is certainly true, a close second assurance of our forgiveness is found in Jesus' ascension into heaven.

Think about it for a moment: sin caused all mankind to be cast out from God's presence. No sinful human is allowed to come before God and live. Why not? Because God can not tolerate sin.

But then there is Jesus. Even though he is true God from eternity, he is also true man - just like us. In fact, Jesus represents all of us. How so? Because, even though he committed no wrong, God placed all our sins on Jesus to such a degree that he became sin personified - representing the whole human race on the cross. God punished Jesus for all those sins. He died. He rose again. And because He rose, He is now represents the human race as being forgiven and justified.

The fact that Jesus – a true human being – ascended into heaven shows that the human race has been reconciled to God. This fact gave the disciples great joy and I pray that it gives you joy as well.

Does some sin from your past still haunt you today? Remember that Jesus bore that sin on the cross for you. It has been paid for in full. And because Jesus, who bore your sin, was raised and welcomed into heaven, you can be absolutely sure that, when your last hour comes, you too will be welcomed into heaven. Through faith in Jesus, you are reconciled to God.

Yes, Jesus' ascension gives us joy. It assures us that our sins are forgiven. Let us now see how it assures us that he is in control.

Part Two: It assures that Christ is in control.

Another remarkable result of Jesus' ascension is that the disciples were no longer afraid. Just think, 40 days earlier, when the resurrected Christ first appeared to them, they were meeting together behind locked doors – afraid of what the Jews might do to them. Even when Jesus appeared to them again a week later, they still kept the doors locked.<sup>1</sup> And can we blame them? The same people who crucified Jesus were still in control over Jerusalem. What would prevent those Jews from going after Jesus' disciples?

But look at the disciples now after Jesus ascended into heaven: at Christ's command they joyfully go back to Jerusalem - waiting for Him to fulfill his promise. And they don't meet behind locked doors either; rather *they stayed continually at the temple, praising God*. Do you know who were also at the temple? The High Priest, Temple Guards, Sanhedrin and, right next to the temple, Pilate himself. Let that sink in for a moment: after Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples publicly met in the midst of all their enemies – joyfully and openly praising Jesus!

Think of the irony: Before Jesus' ascension they acted like scared little church mice, but now that he ascended into heaven they were more courageous than a squad of Navy SEALs? Why? Because they trusted Jesus' promises.

On numerous occasions Jesus told his disciples that he would return to his Father and their Father to take his rightful place at God's right hand. Jesus promised that he would not leave his disciples as orphans, but would send the Holy Spirit to counsel, guide, and protect them. Not only that, but he promised that he himself would be with them – even though they couldn't see him.

These promises and seeing Jesus ascend into heaven encouraged the disciples. They thought: "Jesus is on God's throne. He is ruling everything for the benefit of his Church. His resurrection proves he has power over death. There is no reason for me to be afraid: Jesus is in control, and will keep his promise to work in all things for the good of those who love him."

So, we can see how the disciples were emboldened by Jesus' ascension into heaven, but what about us? Do we live in the same confidence the disciples did – even going so far as to confess Christ in the heart of enemy territory? Sadly, if we are honest with ourselves, we often act more like the

disciples before Jesus's ascension – huddled together in fear over what's going on in the world. We are afraid that if we speak too boldly against sin, we might become targets of internet rage, social shaming or lawsuits. We're afraid that friends will disown us and our community hate us for being too zealous for the Gospel. Seeing the rapid change in our society and the worldwide persecution of Christians, we want to hide – closing our eyes and ears to everything, pretending that it's a bad dream and that, if we ignore it, it will all go away.

But, brothers and sisters in Christ, it will not go away. These are all results of the devil snuffing out the proclamation of the Gospel. The only remedy is a bold witness of the truth – just like it was for Jesus' first disciples in Jerusalem. Take heart: Jesus rules. He is in control over all things. Fight the good fight. Witness your faith. Yes, you might suffer. You might even physically die. But Jesus promises to be with you through it all. If people hurt you, he will heal you. If people insult you, he will defend you. If people kill you, he will raise you to life. Our world needs to hear the Gospel of Christ. Our society needs to know why it stands under God's wrath so that people might repent and be saved. Our world needs a clear witness of the truth given in love. And Jesus promises us his same presence and same Spirit that he gave his original disciples. Christ will keep his promise because He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God.

Jesus' ascension gives us joy. It assures us that he is in control. It assures us that he is coming again soon.

Part Three: It assures us that He is coming back.

One of the most comforting promises Jesus gave his disciples before he ascended into heaven was that he was coming back. Even after he ascended, he sent angels to reassure them of that promise: *"Men of Galilee," they said, "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."*<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus is coming back. His visible absence is only temporary. Yes, we are sad that he is gone but, in view of what he is doing for us, we are also happy that he went! Why is that?

Well, imagine a father telling his daughter that he is going to Wyoming to pick up a new, special pony for her from a renowned horse breeder, and that he might be gone for a few days. That daughter will certainly be sad that her father is gone, but she will also be happy that he went away. If he didn't go, how would she ever get her pony? Happy that he left, she will also eagerly wait for his return. Because of the pony? Yes, but not only for the pony. She will also look forward to being with her Dad again and enjoying her new pony with him.

This is how the disciples viewed Jesus' ascension into heaven, and this is how God wants us to view it too. Jesus went into heaven to get a special gift ready for us. True, we are sad that he is gone, but we are also glad because we know why he went: to prepare paradise for us.

And this is why we eagerly look forward to Christ's return: when he comes back, He will bring all of heaven with him so that we can enjoy that blessed place of sinlessness, joy and perfection with him for all eternity.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I hope you have seen why meditating on Jesus' ascension is such an important and comforting thing for us to do. Whenever you feel lonely or scared – wondering where Jesus is and how you can face life, ask God to give you joy as you remember the meaning and promises of Christ's ascension: 1) It assures us that our sins are forgiven and that we are, therefore, at peace with God. 2) It assures that Christ is in control, working in all things for our good. 3) It assures us that He is coming back to take us to live with him forever in paradise. For all these reasons, Jesus' ascension truly gives us joy. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. John 20:19,26

<sup>ii</sup> Acts 1:11 NIV84