**Ascension Day**

*Modified Evening Prayer Service*

May 21, 2020

***Preservice Music and Bell Peal***

**Opening Hymn: CW # 173 v. 1 & 3** *On Christ’s Ascension I Now Build*

**On Christ’s ascension I now build The hope of my ascension.**

**This hope alone has always stilled All doubt and apprehension;**

**For where the head is there as well I know his members are to dwell**

**When Christ shall some and call them.**

**Oh, grant, dear Lord, this grace to me, Recalling your ascension.**

**That I may serve you faithfully, Adorning your redemption;**

**And then, when all my days will cease, Let me depart in joy and peace**

**In answer to my pleading.**

M: O Lord, open my lips.

**C: And my mouth shall declare your praise.**

M: Hasten to save me, O God.

**C: O Lord, come quickly to help me.**

M: The Lord be with you.

Lord God, you have brought us safely to this hour of evening prayer. We thank you for providing all that we need for body and life. Bless those who participate in this worship in your name. Forgive our sins. Speak to our hearts. Dispel our sorrows with the comfort of your Word, and receive our hymns of thanks and praise, through Jesus Christ, our living Savior, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

***Let My Prayer*** (Psalm 141:1,2)

**C: ♫ Let my prayer rise before you as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.**

 **O Lord, I call to you; come to me quickly; hear my voice when I cry to you.**

 **Let my prayer rise before you as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.**

**First Lesson: Acts 1:1-11 (EHV)**

I wrote my first book, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began doing and teaching 2 until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3 After he had suffered, he presented himself alive to the apostles with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and told them things about the kingdom of God. 4 Once, when he was eating with them, he commanded them, “Do not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for what the Father promised, which you heard from me. 5 For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” 6 So when they were together with him, they asked, “Lord, is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He said to them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

9 After he said these things, he was taken up while they were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 They were looking intently into the sky as he went away. Suddenly, two men in white clothes stood beside them. 11 They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing here looking up into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

**Second Lesson: Luke 24:44-53 (EHV)**

He said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. 46 He said to them, “This is what is written and so it must be: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 Look, I am sending you what my Father promised. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” 50 He led them out as far as the vicinity of Bethany. He lifted up his hands and blessed them. 51 And while he was blessing them, he parted from them and was taken up into heaven. 52 So they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 They were continually in the temple courts, praising and blessing God. Amen.

**Seasonal Response**

M: Give thanks to the Lord; call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done.

**Hymn: CW # 560 v. 1-3** *I Hear the Savior Calling*

**I hear the Savior calling! The gospel comes to me,**

**My eyes once closed in blindness Are opened now to see**

**That I myself was helpless To live eternally**

**But, dying, Christ did save me, And now he calls for me!**

**I hear the Savior calling! He leads a soul to me,**

**A soul in bitter anguish, One needing to be free.**

**The gift I have to offer Is Christ, my Lord’s decree**

**That all have been forgiven-- My Savior calls for me!**

**I hear the Savior calling! He gives this charge to me;**

**To serve the best I’m able, Whate’er the call may be.**

**Thus hand in hand with others Who share the gospel key**

**We spread the gospel tidings-- My Savior calls for me!**

**Sermon:** Acts 1:1-11

**Be My Witnesses**

Dear servants of Christ: When a child first goes off to college, well-meaning parents will often overwhelm their son or daughter with advice. The most important is saved till that moment just before the door slams and the car drives away: “Don’t forget to write!” What the parents most want their child to remember is often the very last thing they will say.

When a person knows that he is about to die, he will often gather family and friends around to speak those final words of advice. Such a person doesn’t waste time on the weather, etc. Those final words are what a person most wants those remaining to remember. There’s something about a person’s final words that we respect.

On his last day visibly on earth, Jesus was besieged with questions about this, that, and the other thing. But he would not be drawn away from sharing that one thing he most wanted us to remember. As Luke records in our text, Jesus’ very last words were these: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Simple words really, and easily understood. A church’s reason for existence is to proclaim the message of our Savior. Glorious Christmas worship should serve the sharing of the gospel. Online services extend our reach with the message of Christ. Ladies Aid and Council meetings are focus on spreading the Word by whatever tools they have.

As I said, simple words, easily understood. But let’s examine again Jesus’ final words and determine how to put them into practice. “Be my witnesses,” he says, “Because you have a message, you have a helper, and you have a reason.”

Now, we’ve met those people who can talk our ears off and not say a thing, right? By contrast, a Christian has plenty worthwhile to say. You are to be Jesus’ witnesses because you have a message.

Luke indicated this reason for writing his gospel: “I wrote my first book, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began doing and teaching….” Luke’s purpose was to give us Jesus’ message as Jesus had personally delivered it to his disciples. Luke also reports that Jesus gave “instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.”

Wouldn’t these facts, by themselves, make the message worth talking about? An old TV commercial proclaimed, “When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen.” When the message comes from a supposed expert, people will pay closer attention. Look at the message we’ve got! It’s God’s message, delivered by Jesus, the Son of God, and by the Spirit of God.

Not only the source, but the content of the message makes it worth talking about. Again, Luke recorded: “He appeared to them over a period of forty days and told them things about the kingdom of God.” If people will admit there is a heaven, they’ll agree they’d rather be there than not. We have a message about heaven and how to get there.

Finally, we have not gotten so far from Easter that we have forgotten its powerful message. Luke brings up the suffering of Christ, and that “he presented himself alive to the apostles with many convincing proofs.” Why does that matter? Elsewhere the Lord declares: “He was handed over to death because of our trespasses and was raised to life because of our justification,” (Romans 4:25). The message of Jesus’ death and resurrection is the message of forgiveness: a message worth talking about.

Having the message alone, however, may not make us willing witnesses. For example, you may be an eyewitness to a murder. But simply knowing the truth; does that make it easy to sit on the witness stand?

We’ve watched too many TV shows: so, we think that the defendant will send his goons to bump us off if we testify; or we may not want to relive a troublesome experience. Or yet again, from too many lawyer shows, we figure the lawyers are going to make us look foolish with all their penetrating questions. We hesitate to speak.

Wouldn’t it be a lot easier if you had a coach able to sit near you, so that you keep the facts straight; and to encourage you? Well, that’s not available in a court of law, but in this matter of relating his message, Jesus assured, “Wait for what the Father promised…. You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” That has happened, you’ve got your helper!

One of the more threatening things about witnessing to Jesus, for many, is concern about saying the right thing. Many feel that they don’t know what to say or how to say it. That’s a legitimate concern. But your helper knows his stuff!

The Bible says of him, “The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God,” (I Corinthians 2:10 NIV 84). Things that are beyond our comprehension, the Spirit knows like the back of his hand. We can be witnesses because our helper helps us keep the facts straight.

Christ further encourages us that the Spirit gives power to the message. Even the great prophet Moses was initially concerned about being a witness. “What if they don’t believe me?” he asked. Ever thought that yourself? You may be convinced you have a great message, and that the Spirit will help you, but what if somebody just won’t believe?

Well, we can’t force belief. And Jesus asks us only to be witnesses. But we still have confidence because of our helper. Jesus promised, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” The Greek word for power is “dynamus”. The English word “dynamite” is based on that Greek word. That’s something: your helper gives dynamite to the message!

Which is why St. Paul could write, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation…,” (Romans 1:16) and “Faith comes from hearing the message,” (Romans 10:17). Witnessing works, for there’s a helper who makes it work.

And that helper is yours! Sure, he did not come in the dramatic way he came to the apostles on the first Christian Pentecost. But he has come. On that Pentecost, Peter promised, “Be baptized...and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,” (Acts 2:38). He was there at your Baptism, and every moment since.

And he’s been teaching you. In your own Sunday School days, in Bible class, in Confirmation class, in sermons, the Holy Spirit was there. In any way that we have had contact with the Word of God the Holy Spirit was getting the message of God’s Kingdom into us.

Admittedly, it may not all be perfectly organized, but it’s up there! In those situations where you may feel at a loss for words, the Spirit knows just where to find the right passage or the right phrase to use. What an awesome helper! He knows the whole message of God, he’s taught most of it to us, and he puts dynamite in it! Why not be Jesus’ witnesses?

Because of the merchandizing message of our country, the assumption is that if someone speaks well of a product, they’ve been paid to do so. Likewise, when we testify about Jesus, some will question: What’s in it for you?”

What’s in it for us? Nothing! The promise of heaven is the simple result of believing the message about Jesus Christ. Whether we testify or not, doesn’t determine whether we go to heaven or not. We could say absolutely nothing to anybody about heaven and still receive that inheritance.

What’s our reason then? Why be a witness?

What newly engaged young lady would put her engagement ring in her pocket and forget about it? She’s got good news. She may be coy and sly about how she tries to catch someone’s eye with that flashy diamond, but she’s gonna talk about it. The news is too good to keep to herself.

If we’ve been listening to what the Holy Spirit taught, we know that we are sinners damned to hell. But God has turned us around in Christ and given us heaven free of charge. Christ has become the bridegroom—we’re the bride! That’s too good to keep to ourselves!

Especially if we realize that others are sinners as much as we. Even uncle Joe! He may be a very nice guy—brought us presents when we were kids—but if he has no faith in Christ, this “nice man” will be in hell. Our brother Bill may be a real decent person—helped his neighbors during COVID challenges—but if he hasn’t faith in Jesus, he won’t be in heaven. And good old Aunt Martha, without faith in Jesus will be suffering eternally in hell’s fires. Be my witnesses, because you’ve got a reason, says Jesus, some friends and relatives are on the road to hell.

How could I be so cruel? How can I cavalierly dismiss their kindness as if it means nothing? Not I. God himself says “all our righteous acts are like a filthy cloth,” (Isaiah 64:6). Not one of us is good enough to be pleasing to the Lord.

But the message is: “No one has greater love than this: that someone lays down his life for his friends,” (John 15:13). Jesus laid it down. And that’s for everyone: “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life,” (John 3:16). That’s good news; that everyone’s worthless and sinful acts have been atoned for at the cross of Christ.

The complicating factor is that we don’t have forever for this. The angels promised, “This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go.” Jesus will come back. Then eternal situations will be set, no changes allowed. So, Jesus elsewhere urged us to “do the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work,” (John 9:4).

When? Jesus says, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set.” If we were guaranteed the world were to end in a hundred years, we’d maybe do a little mission work now, but leave the majority for a later generation. “Kick the can down the road” is an issue for individuals—and for churches—not just government budgeting personnel. If Jesus could come tomorrow, we’ve got to be working today! Be my witnesses because you’ve got a reason—people who need your witness now!

We have a whole host of reasons to be Jesus’ witnesses.  On the one hand, we have a real, useful and powerful message. We have a helper in proclaiming it clearly and effectively. We have people who need it. On the other hand, we also have a whole host of excuses: no time, no skill, no knowledge, no interest. On either hand, we have Jesus’ final words, and those are the ones we most want to carry out. “Be my witnesses.” AMEN.

**Prayer of the Church**

O Jesus Christ, our merciful and ascended Lord, we praise you for the victory you won on our behalf over death, the devil, sin and hell, and that you rose from death again to be glorified at God’s right hand in heaven. From there you promise to be doing all things for the benefit of your people on earth, the Church of God.

O everlasting King, great is our need for your love, mercy, and continual help in these evil times. Therefore, be to us the complete cure for our sins, our helper in trouble, our consoler in sorrow, our relief from pain, our healer in sickness, our protector from peril, our source of supply in time of need, our deliverer in temptations, our strength for every trial, our guide in times of confusion, and finally, our redeemer from death.

Give ear to the prayers of all who call to you for these blessings. Reach out to the unbelieving world with your strength and your mercy, that they may also find in you their consolation and strength, and through faith, their hope of heaven.

Send your Holy Spirit to us that through us your glorious message may go out into all the world. Support the work of our synod in lands far from us. In our local community, by the Spirit’s work, make our witness filled with clarity and purpose, and be the powerful tool to turn hearts from unbelief to faith.

How blessed we are to know that we can lay claim to your promises through faith, and to know that you forgive our sins, as well as the sins of all. Crown our faith with eternal life at your side in heaven. To you be everlasting honor and praise. Amen.

**Lord’s Prayer**

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.**

**Prayer for Peace**

M: Lord God, all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works come from you. Give to us, your servants, the peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be motivated to obey your commandments. Defend us also from the fear of our enemies that we may live in peace and quietness, through the merits of Christ, our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**Blessing**

M: ♫ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ †, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be

 with you all. Amen.

**Closing Hymn: CW # 558 v. 1-3** *Christ High Ascended*

**Christ high ascended, now in glory seated, Throned and exalted, victory completed,**

**Death’s dread dominion finally defeated-- We are his witnesses.**

**Christ, from the Father ev’ry pow’r possessing, Who on his chosen lifted hand in blessing,**

**Sends forth his servants, Still in faith confessing-- We are his witnesses.**

**Christ, who in dying won for us salvation, Lives now the firstborn of the new creation;**

**To win disciples out of ev’ry nation, We are his witnesses.**

***Announcements***

***Brief Postlude***

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