

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Ascension, May 21, 2009

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Hymns: 212, 216:1, 223, 213, 218:6.

Lessons: Daniel 7: 13-14, Acts 1:1-11, John 7: 33-39.

Text: John 16: 5-7.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

When Jesus spoke these words to his disciples, they didn't know how much meaning these words held. That would not be revealed until later, and that "later" is celebrated on that day when Jesus bodily ascends into heaven, 40 days after Easter Sunday, actually on a Thursday, leaving his disciples on earth. By going to the cross, he was carrying out his Father's will to the end. He was fulfilling the plan of salvation. He was preparing the path to the Father in heaven for all who believe in Jesus as their only Savior from their sins. One writer said "The disciples had to let him go in order to receive the good he came to bring them. Anything else spelled failure and disaster" for God's plan of salvation.

The rest of God's plan included sending the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus had already told the disciples several times. Not only did Jesus have to leave them in order to send the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, but without Jesus' death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit would have no means to work saving faith. Everything that happened to Jesus was part of the Triune God's plan for the world's salvation. That includes

THE ASCENSION OF JESUS INTO HEAVEN

- 1. Jesus has gone away, and he is no longer physically with them for answers and words of advice.**
- 2. However, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, who has provided us with all the words of Jesus that we need to know.**

Many of us have lost someone to whom we looked for advice, instructions, information, and just plain listening to us when things weren't going well and maybe providing some kind of comforting words. It may be a parent or a grandparent who has died, or a mentor of some kind who has died, perhaps a teacher or a supervisor at work who has died and we no longer have that person to ask directly for advice, or instructions, or some kind of help. And unless the person who has died was very careful and an excellent planner, teacher and organizer, there are no written documents we can turn to for the answers.

Jesus' disciples had faced a somewhat similar situation when he was crucified. Their teacher, who was more than a teacher, who was the very incarnation of God himself on earth and could answer all questions, had died and been placed in the grave. For three days they hid and some of them huddled together because of fear of the Jews who had murdered their teacher and master. But he had come back to life and risen from the dead, and in recent sermons we've examined some of his appearances to his disciples in the weeks after he rose from the dead. They didn't know when or where he was going to appear again.

Our sermon text is one time when Jesus had made plain to his disciples that he wouldn't be with them on earth forever, or even for their own entire lives. But they didn't always recognize that. He was true God, God's very Son, and so it would be easy to expect that he would be with them as long as they needed him. We aren't always well-prepared when that parent, or mentor, or teacher or supervisor dies. We can always find questions we want to ask them – after they are gone!

Jesus had told his disciples that he would leave them. He said that *“Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’”* They didn’t seem to be able to even ask the right questions. A little later, after our sermon text, he told them *“In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.”* John 16:16. They didn’t understand that this meant that he would be crucified and buried, and they would not see him for three days, and then he would rise from the dead and they would see him again. They didn’t understand that at some point after his resurrection he would leave this earth to sit on his throne in heaven.

We could have used a number of different passages from John’s gospel to talk about the fact that Jesus must go away – ascend into heaven and return to his Father’s right hand in glory – before he could send the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Counselor. They didn’t understand, but we have the whole picture, so we can see what happened. We have the entire story, and I hate to use the word “story” because it suggests fiction. We have the entire history.

Many Christians still gather in worship on the evening 40 days after Jesus rose from the dead to remember and commemorate, and to learn from Jesus’ ascending into heaven and leaving this earth. We know he went to be with his father, to sit at the right hand of God, a position of power and honor in heaven. But we, like his disciples who saw him bodily, physically ascend into heaven, often wish he were here with us, to talk to us. He’s gone but we are not abandoned. He left us and commanded that we are to be about his business, the business of telling others about him and preparing for his second coming, when he will come to judge the living and the dead. And unlike that dear human one we wish was still alive and with us, Jesus has provided for us some extremely clear instructions and information. We have, of course, Jesus’ own words recorded in the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And we have the entire New Testament written down for us. But have you ever made the connection between his sending the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and the recording of the written Word of God we call the New Testament?

Our sermon text tells us he said *“But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”* He rose from the dead on the day we celebrate as Easter. He physically, bodily ascended into heaven 40 days later. Then ten days later, on the day called “Pentecost”, he sent the Counselor – the Holy Spirit – to his disciples. On that day the Holy Ghost, the Holy Spirit, gave Jesus’ followers the ability to proclaim his life-saving message in various languages they had never before learned. In addition, *“men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”* 2 Peter 1:21. In that way God caused them by what we call verbal inspiration, to write down the very words he wanted us to know! So Jesus is gone, but we have every word we need recorded for us.

The words St. Paul wrote by the will and power of the Holy Spirit, the Counselor, to Timothy, a younger pastor, certainly apply to us: *“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

Did you notice that the Holy Scriptures are the words which are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus? And that was the work of the Counselor, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit of God whom Jesus promised to send. Jesus had to ascend into heaven for the Holy Spirit to come to mankind.

The words his followers asked him before he ascended into heaven in our Epistle lesson tell us that they didn’t really understand what his work was all about: *“they asked him, ‘Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’”* Acts 1:6. They were looking for an earthly kingdom and didn’t recognize that Jesus’ kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, a ruling in the hearts of all his faithful believers.

They were sad that he had left them, as he told them earlier they would be – he even used the words “*filled with grief*” in our sermon text. But he plainly told them it was for their good that he leave this earth. “*But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.*” The KJV reads this way: “*Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.*” The KJV uses the word “Comforter”. Our text is part of a lengthy conversation which is recorded over several chapters of John’s gospel. Jesus uses the word Counselor or Comforter, both meaning the same thing, several times.

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor [KJV Comforter] to be with you forever--” John 14:16. *“But the Counselor, [KJV: Comforter] the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”* John 14:26. *“When the Counselor [KJV: Comforter] comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.”* John 15:26-27.

Jesus is gone and is no longer with us. But he has provided the Bible, the Word of God, inspired by God in every word, so that we can be reminded of everything Jesus has said to us.

Jesus is gone, but we have every word we need to know. Jesus is not with us bodily, but he is with us with his words. And God has provided every word we need for our eternal salvation. It is all in the book we call “the Bible, “the Word”.

That place, the Bible, is the source for answers to our questions. In the words of Jesus recorded for our learning we find advice, instructions, information, and more than just a few kind and comforting words. We really need no other source of information for our eternal salvation.

And it is a practically endless source of information. Information. Counsel. Comfort. Advice. Words to live by. Answers to our questions. It is all in the Word. Everything you need to know for your eternal salvation!

How long would it take to preach on the entire Bible? I don’t know. But a simple mathematical calculation estimated that it would take the equivalent of 7 years of sermon times, estimating 20 minutes per sermon, just to read the entire Bible out loud if I used only the typical time of our sermons, reading only once a week, (about the amount of time it would take you to read this sermon out loud) to just READ the Bible and not say anything about it. That is just reading the Bible and not preaching a sermon.

You, of course, can read it much more quickly than waiting 7 years to hear it. You can read it yourself. You can use any pattern you want to read it. There are many Bible-reading courses that even identify parts of the scriptures to read each day. There is even a schedule for reading the entire Bible in the front of our hymnal, The Lutheran Hymnal, starting on page 161 in the front. Then, of course, you could just start reading the Bible at any point. It is, after all, God’s holy Word. It is the Counselor, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit of God speaking to you, and will always benefit you.

Jesus left. But he left work for you to do. Just like he told his followers in our Epistle lesson, he tells us, and each of you: “*you will be my witnesses.*” Lord, make us good witnesses for you! You have given us the perfect source for our instructions – the Bible! Amen.