

Introduction

Welcome to St. Peter's Lutheran Church Estevan. Pastor Kleemola here to bring you a partial service for Ascension Day – May 21, 2020.

Readings for Ascension Day

First Reading: Acts 1:1-11
Psalm: Psalm 47
Epistle: Ephesians 1:15-23
Gospel: Luke 24:44-53

Text for today's Sermon is taken from Revelation 1:7

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

Sermon – An Amazing Sight, Not Yet Seen

Christ has risen! He has risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Dear friends in Christ Jesus; In the course of a lifetime our eyes view some amazing sights. Already, we have seen the advent of the previously inconceivable – space travel, the Internet, laser surgery, artificial intelligence. We will continue to witness ongoing social, scientific, and technological revolutions.

But more amazing that anything we've seen or imagined is what the Scriptures promise – the Second Coming of Christ. Returning to earth for Judgment Day, He will flash like lightning from the skies surrounded by all the angels of heaven. All other sights will blur in comparison to this fantastic event. We will see the Son of Man and Son of God, Jesus Christ, return in glory to gather His people and judge the world.

However, we cannot assume that everyone in our society, or even everyone in our congregation, believes this. Many persons, even those who call themselves Christian, don't believe in biblical miracles. A recent survey by the Barna Research Group indicates that 35 percent of the

Christian population – that would be in the U.S., and I have to think that the percentage in Canada would be even higher – does not believe Jesus Christ was physically resurrected. If they do not believe He rose from the dead, how can they believe He ascended and will return? Let's address the skeptics of the miraculous by focusing on the great miracle of the ascension of Christ.

The account of Christ's ascension is recorded in the first chapter of the book of Acts. The gospels tell us Jesus came to earth to die on a cross to secure forgiveness for all people. He was our Substitute, taking our place, paying for our sins. After the crucifixion, God the Father raised Jesus from the dead and returned Him to His place of honour in heaven.

As the apostles witnessed Jesus rising into the sky, the Bible states, **“he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going.”** (Acts 1:9–10) To say they were looking intently is likely an under-statement! How about looking with eyes frozen open in a slack-jawed gape? They had seen something indescribable. Suddenly, angels appeared and explained that Jesus would reappear in the same way that they had seen Him go. How would these men tell their families and friends what happened? It's not hard to imagine the skepticism on their peers' faces when they heard the story.

Today, many minds are filled with doubt regarding the miracles of Christ, the ascension included. This disbelief stems from a humanistic perspective that discounts contradictions to the established principles of science. George Barna explains, “Humanists place their faith in that which has been discovered through the mind and resourcefulness of humankind. They revere advances and breakthroughs in areas such as the natural sciences; they worship the expansion of education and the enlightenment it is supposed to deliver.” (*If Things Are So Good, Then Why Do I Feel So Bad* [Chicago: Moody, 1994] 93)

Humanists seek a logical explanation for everything and refuse to acknowledge the power and wonder of God. A non-Christian or nominal Christian who has been saturated with humanism is likely to respond to the ascension with, “Yeah, right. Jesus just floats up into the air. No way!” The strong tendency is to doubt such an incredible story.

However, human intellect is neither perfect nor unlimited. It can only take us so far. God has shown us there are truths beyond the empirical world that need to be learned. These truths are based on faith – not blind faith, but a reasoned faith that takes seriously the truth of the

Bible. The Christian is moved by the Spirit of God to comprehend not just the physical world but the spiritual world as well. Believers understand that God is not limited by human reason, and that when we do not understand, we need to trust.

The first followers of Christ learned from experience not to discount the improbable. Luke tells us that when the women who witnessed the resurrection returned to blurt out their great news, the apostles stared at them as if they were insane. They hadn't seen it for themselves, so they didn't buy it. (Lk 24:9–11) Sure, they had seen Jesus bring others back to life, but Himself? No way. It conflicted with reason. Only when confronted with irrefutable proof of His resurrection did they change their tune. They had to learn to accept truth on the basis of faith.

Having firsthand knowledge of an event is one thing – getting others to acknowledge it is another! Anyone who explains a weird phenomenon has to overcome the skepticism of the listener. One pastor recalls a time when no one believed him. When he was a young teen, he went to his friend Dave's house. He had to wait for him, so he decided to lie on Dave's front lawn and stare at the beautiful twilight. Moments later something caught his eye and his mind screamed, "*What's that?*" It was a large, florescent, orange triangle flying high overhead. There was no sound. It flew at a steady speed, but it did not look like a conventional aircraft. He ran to the front door. "Dave! You've got to get out here now! Dave, there's a UFO!" Dave made it to the porch just in time to catch a glimpse before it disappeared.

Somewhat shocked, they called the airport, the police, anyone they could think of to verify what we had seen. The police laughed when they told them. The airport said they didn't have any planes in the area. Then he went home and wasn't believed there either. When he told his parents, they said he had been reading too many foolish books. When he insisted, they lectured him about arguing about things that could not possibly be true. He wondered, "How come no one believes you when you've experienced something fantastic?"

The next morning brought vindication. As he left for school, he heard Paul Harvey on the radio announce, "Numerous reports of UFOs over Northern Illinois and Southern Wisconsin last night..." He ran back inside, "See! I told you!" Harvey explained it all. A plane, painted gray with florescent orange stripes, was collecting air samples. In the twilight, all that was visible was an orange triangle.

Maybe you have had an experience discounted by others. One pastor tells the story of when his wife and her parents were driving in a terrific storm when frogs and lizards began falling from the sky. A tornado had sucked up a swamp and then dumped it on them! Maybe you have heard incredible stories from your parents or grandparents. Such accounts make us aware of how some seemingly impossible things are actually true!

Some people may still be suspicious about miracles like the ascension. Maybe they question the motives of the New Testament writers. Maybe they wonder if they got the story straight. In a word, they are suspicious. Charles Swindoll notes, "Suspicion is the act of suspecting something wrong without proof or evidence. It is mistrust... doubt... skepticism... extreme or negative caution." (*Come before Winter and Share My Hope* [Portland: Multnomah, 1985] 156) It is incredulity without cause.

Parents can detect suspicion in their young children. Dad tries for the first time to get his child on a bike or into a pool, but the child recoils with terror, sure that disaster is imminent. Dad says, "It's okay, I'm here. I won't let you get hurt." This is small comfort to the little one, who stiffens and says *no!* It continues until the child finally trusts enough to act. Then the child finds out that dad was right; the distrust was unnecessary.

God, like a patient father, works with us until we are brought from resistance to acceptance – from doubt to faith. His Spirit brings conviction that not only *could* the ascension have happened, but that it *did* happen. Like the men walking to Emmaus who were tutored by the resurrected Christ, we have our eyes opened to see the truth. (Lk 24:13–35) The event has not changed. We have.

The reason we must embrace the truth of the ascension is that it is inseparably connected to the return of Christ! Judgment Day is the counterpart of the ascension. To believe that Christ departed according to the biblical record is to anticipate that He will return. The ascension is history, but His return is *destiny*. As the angels said to the apostles, **"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."** (Acts 1:11) We are confronted with the implications. If we expect the Lord to return as He promised, we will be sure to be prepared for Him!

We are prepared when we take the advice of the Bible and trust in Him as our Saviour. We dump our humanistic pride and pick up an attitude of humble faith. Like the early Christians of Thessalonica, we abandon an earthbound view of the future and look for the return of Jesus

to save us from God's anger against a sinful world. (1 Thess 1:9–10) Recognizing Him as our Lord and Master, we work diligently, knowing He could return at any moment. (Mt 24:45–51) The ascension of Jesus is integral to planning for the future – our future – when He returns!

Scripture gives us a peek at that moment, **“Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.”** (Rev 1:7) Just as the ascension angels indicated, Jesus will return from the sky. His return will be as unexpected as His departure. All people will experience this, even those immediately responsible for His death. The entire human race will see the power and glory of the Saviour and have no choice but to bow and confess that He is Lord.

That moment will be glorious – the fulfillment of our hopes and dreams; escape from death, and a perfect life forever! God wants everyone to have that experience. It becomes ours when we trust the Word of God and His promises.

The book of Revelation states that when Christ returns, all who denied Him will mourn (1:7): Christ's return will be horrific for those who refuse to believe. They will see the truth. They could have accepted the reports of the apostles. They should have concluded that Christ did indeed rise from the dead and ascend, but they didn't. They will see for themselves how foolish they were to deny what they couldn't explain. Their eyes, literally, will see the conquering Christ, and they will learn that they too should have believed that Jesus would return. They didn't see eye to eye with Scripture, but they will have to look Jesus, their Judge, in the eye.

We can be different – people who believe the Word of God. Maybe today there is the sense that God is moving us to trust in the miracles of Christ in a new way. The Spirit is calling us to believe. Now is the time to receive the certainty of salvation through faith. When the clouds part and the Son of Man comes, it is too late. Today is the time to assent to the descent of Jesus from heaven. We cement that image in our minds. By His Spirit, we envision it happening, because one day our eyes will see it! Amen

Prayer of the Church

God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of the trumpet. Ascended Lord, hear the prayers of Your people and grant our supplication.

That the Lord may grant us all things in Christ so we may be sustained in trial, strengthened in weakness and delivered from trouble;

That the Church of Christ may flourish and the good news of Christ crucified, risen and ascended would be proclaimed to all the ends of the earth;

That the Lord may richly supply us with faithful pastors who will preach Your Word in season and out; and that we may hear, believe and live out this Gospel;

That the nations of the earth may seek peace; and that the leaders of our country may pursue justice, righteousness and peace;

That the pandemic may come to an end, and that livelihood and common life may resume;

That all who are afflicted may be strengthened in illness and comforted in adversity, particularly Pattie Berday, Dean Euteneier, Gerald Olson and Wanda Stang;

That the faithful may not fret what we do not know but rejoice in Christ, our Saviour, and live in holiness and righteousness all the days of our lives;

That the Lord may grant us joyful hearts and peace at the last, knowing that neither death nor life, nor any powers, can separate us from the love of God in Christ;

That we may be as generous in our tithes and offerings as the Lord is in giving us His gifts, and that we may support the poor and those in need;

That we may know the Lord's presence in the means of His grace, hearing His Word, receiving His absolution and feasting at His table with faith and joy in our hearts'

That we may remember the saints of old, who contended for the Lord in their own day; and that we may join them at last in the marriage feast of the Lamb without end;

All these things and whatever else we need, we ask You to grant us for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

Benediction

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.