

Heaven and Earth
Sermon for Ascension Day
Sermon Text: Luke 24:44-53



Then He said to them, “These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and Psalms must be fulfilled.”⁴⁵ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,⁴⁶ and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,⁴⁷ and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”⁵⁰ And He led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands He blessed them.⁵¹ While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven.⁵² and they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy,⁵³ and were continually in the temple blessing God.

Ever since Ascension Day, heaven is different, and since Ascension Day, the earth is also different because since Ascension Day, Jesus – who was born in Bethlehem and died on the cross on Golgotha – is in heaven. Therefore a part of us is in heaven and a part of Jesus is here on earth. Jesus’ disciples were the first who could experience firsthand how heaven and earth changed. This happened on the day Jesus ascended into heaven, at first they were shocked from the crucifixion and horrible death of their Lord. Then with joy, they realized that Jesus was alive. They were to an extent pulled from the vortex of depression and grief into a new whirlwind of joy – from the deepest hell and sorrow into seventh heaven. And now, they stood on a mountain and were once again brought back to solid ground with a bang because Jesus said: “I am going!” But Christ leaves without going away. He goes away so that He can always be here, in all places... for all people. Without being able to see Him, people are to have heaven on earth through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. Jesus wants to be and remain within reach, within shouting distance. He wants to create heaven on earth!

Christ’s Ascension is firmly established on our earth and yet there is a sacred imperative and progress in it – and the direction is toward heaven. Our eyes are focused upwards, upon the one who sits at the right hand of God, on Him who holds the whole universe in His hand. We marvel in worship that it is He who is present with us at the same time in His body and blood. Yet we find it difficult to imagine this other world that Jesus promised us. We, who are so strongly connected to what is earthly, are like a goldfish in a fishbowl. Like the goldfish in its world, we are tied to our world. Just as the goldfish can barely imagine that there is a world outside of its fishbowl, so we are tied to what is tangible and temporal. We mockingly ask from the prison of our materialistic glass bowl where heaven is into which Christ ascended. We want to apply human thinking as a standard to God’s Word and conclude that, with Jesus’ ascension into heaven, we have clearly entered the fantasy world of the disciples of that time. Such thinking denies the exciting fact of how God extends into our world. With our human thinking we say: “That which cannot be must not be.” By doing this, we place ourselves over God’s creative Word and dictate to Him what He can and can’t do. It is therefore not surprising that Ascension Day has become Father’s Day when people enjoy the greenery of nature with some beer.

Heaven is not a special place that is several floors above us – with Christ’s Ascension, we don’t testify where heaven is but to whom heaven belongs. In fact, not only heaven but the entire universe is in the hands of Him who died on the cross on Golgotha. He said: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.” (Matt. 28:18) While the disciples still marveled at this wonderful event, Christ brought them back into harsh reality. They should remain on earth with both feet and yet act as empowered witnesses of the Holy Spirit. They should stand with their feet on the ground and their gaze focused on heaven. So Christ’s Ascension pushes us towards Pentecost. The Lord commands the disciples not to leave Jerusalem and to wait on the promise of the Father. Even the angels admonished them not to look to heaven but to do what Jesus had instructed them to do. The disciples were prepared for a new connection with Christ and a changed form of His presence – they should be baptized in the Holy Spirit. Unlike John’s baptism, Christian baptism creates an intimate fellowship with the Holy God and unites us directly with Jesus who sits at the right hand of God. However, this is not a stagnant fact but a bubbling source of life. The Holy Spirit wants us to be extravagant with all the fullness of Jesus. So Ascension Day is not the end of an exciting story with Jesus, but the beginning of a new future. In His power, Christ wants to be present in this world with His works.

For a while, the disciples were still a fearful group in Jerusalem and waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Even though they had tried, they couldn't produce the Holy Spirit themselves. Yet, exactly as Jesus had foretold, the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost, 10 days later. Only then did they understand what Jesus' Words meant: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (Matt. 28:19) Weak human beings were and are made into the instruments, into the means, and into the multipliers of divine action that creates salvation. At Pentecost, this promise was fulfilled and it became the birthday of the Church. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit does not produce impetuous enthusiasm, trances, or inarticulate outcries, rather it produces an intelligible sermon that glorifies the great deeds of God in Jesus Christ. All this is not happening somewhere in heaven, but within this wretched humanity, torn apart and mortally wounded by sinful rebellion against God. It is the domain of the Holy Spirit and we stand in the middle of it. Sometimes, we get caught up in the whirlpool of time ourselves and are pulled in different directions by grief and temptations. In this situation, the Holy Spirit constantly guides us back to one place: Golgotha, where heaven was opened for us and a new world opened up. There we also become living witnesses of His resurrection - "you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8b) Wherever these words are proclaimed, heaven is opened and a future and indestructible hope are opened.

Jesus' mission starts on Golgotha, it begins there. You can imagine it like the little stones we used to throw into a pond when we were children. Where the stone strikes, ripples form, spreading in ever-increasing concentric circles across the entire pond. That's how it is with spreading the Word of God. It begins at Golgotha and with the joyful message of Jesus' resurrection. Then it continues on: from Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria to the end of the earth. God's word also manifests itself in us in a similar way. It begins with my baptism and uniting with Jesus' death and resurrection. As a witness of Christ, I am called to stand at this point - there, where I live, where God placed me as a father or mother or son or daughter in my family or with my relatives - here is the starting point of my Christian witness. This mission movement spreads out in ripples - at school, at work, in my neighborhood, in our country, in our culture, and even in other language and cultural circles - "*you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*" Ashamed, we must ask: is this really so? What about the impact point of our missionary witness? Have we really impressed the crucified and risen Christ on our children's hearts through our words, deeds, love, and patience, or have they taken completely different paths? Have we encouraged our colleagues, classmates, and fellow citizens, especially those who were not born in Germany, to engage with the Gospel through our witness? Have we possibly grown tired of mission work or have we perhaps even inwardly turned away from some people because we saw them as "hopeless cases?" What have we ourselves done to extend salvation in Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth? Have we contributed through our sacrifice and prayer or have we neglected to send out missionaries and to spread the Gospel? The fact that billions of people to this day have never heard about Jesus Christ is not evidence of the church's lack of missionary zeal but rather a call to all of us to take our mission as Christians seriously and to proclaim the Gospel boldly and enthusiastically.

With all these questions, we realize that suddenly we are faced with our world and our realities. There is no way we can pull ourselves out of this mess, someone else has to do it. In the text, it doesn't say, "you should be my witnesses", but "*you will be my witnesses.*" Therefore mission is part of the essence of the Church. "You will" - it is a promise and a command at the same time. If salt had lost its taste, it would no longer be of use. If a light is placed under a basket, the room remains in darkness. Light and brightness are unambiguously connected with Jesus Himself. He is the one who sends people as witnesses and He is also the one who kindles faith in people. So the mission really is truly between heaven and earth, as on Ascension Day. Witness ministry happens and should occur until He returns. Mission happens between Ascension Day and the Second Coming of Christ to this earth. The goal will only be reached when Jesus returns. Until then, we stand here with all our weaknesses and ambiguity but we speak in the name and by the command of the One who instructed us. On the way there, we will be disappointed in some places. Sometimes we no longer understand the roadmap. Then we place ourselves here in Saxony, in all of Germany, or wherever it may be with both feet on the ground and look at what is in store for us - it is not terrifying nor is it disappointing. Jesus comes towards us - He loves us and wants to make us perfect. "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price."

(Revelation 22:17) "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

(Revelation 22:20)