

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In the name of ✠ Jesus!

For forty days we've been hearing about it: Jesus rose from the dead. The tomb was empty. The Jews plotted to tell the story that Jesus' "*disciples came by night and stole him away while [they] were asleep*" (Matt. 28:13), and that story has been offered up ever since; after all, resurrection is incredible, and we wouldn't believe it if the tomb were not empty.

But that isn't our only evidence. Besides the empty tomb, Jesus "*presented himself alive to [the disciples] after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them*" ... to Mary Magdalene (John 20:14-18); to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, their hearts burning within them as Jesus explained it all to them (Luke 24:13-35); to the Twelve (minus two) in a locked room, standing alive before them, showing them His hands and side (John 20:19-20), talking with them and even eating with them (Luke 24:36-43); to the disciples again a week later, Thomas this time with them, again Jesus showing His wounds; to seven of the disciples again in Galilee on the shore of the sea, again eating with them. Luke and Paul tell us of other resurrection appearances, too. "*[I]n fact Christ has been raised from the dead,*" a fact that gives us hope, not just for this life, but for everlasting life. He is "*the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*" (1 Cor. 15:20).

Which is also why the Ascension is so significant, for forty days after He had risen from the dead, Jesus walked upon the earth. But on the fortieth day, He "*was taken up*" into heaven and returned to the Father's side. He gathered with His disciples in Bethany, lifted up His hands, blessed them, and "*was carried up into heaven,*" "*a cloud [taking] him out of their sight.*"

And the disciples rejoiced. They "*worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.*" No longer sad, no longer frightened, but filled with joy, and with promise.

So should the remembrance of the Ascension be for us: a time of joy and of promise. It's why it's a regular part of our confession: "He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead" (Apostles' Creed); and from the Nicene Creed: "and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. And He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end." We sing of it, too, in the *Gloria*: "Thou that sittest at the right hand of God the Father, have mercy upon us."

Yes, the promises of Jesus at His Ascension bring us joy. But what are these promises? The first is "*the promise of the Father*" that Jesus had told the disciples about. Remember how Jesus had told them: "*I will ask the Father, and he will give*

*you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth ... You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14:16-17). And again, “the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). Still again, “when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness ...” (John 15:26-27).*

The Spirit is the promise of the Father that He was about to send. The Spirit would clothe the disciples “*with power from on high,*” and they would go forth, fearlessly, as Jesus’ witnesses, just as Jesus had told them. They would go forth starting in Jerusalem, spreading out to Judea and Samaria, and ultimately “*to the end of the earth.*” This promise has been fulfilled, as we’ll hear again in ten short days, and it continues to be fulfilled. Jesus is proclaimed in Fort Wayne, in Puerto Rico, and throughout the world.

Second, Jesus ascends into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father. There the Father gives Jesus “*[a]ll authority in heaven and on earth*” (Matt. 28:18) not as His divine Son, for that power and authority were the Son’s from eternity, but as the Incarnate One, as man. As we just sang: “Thou hast raised our human nature On the clouds to God’s right hand; There we sit in heavenly places, There with Thee in glory stand. Jesus reigns, adored by angels; Man with God is on the throne” (TLH218:5). There, at God’s right hand, the God-man reigns over us, He who sympathizes with our weaknesses, having been tempted in every way as we (Heb. 4:15), who suffered even as we suffer (Heb. 2:18).

To be sure, He reigns in the world with power and might; He threatens and punishes manifest sin. There is little comfort there. No one wants to live in a lawless world, but we know our own sins, worthy themselves of temporal and eternal punishment. Our solace is not that God powerfully gives us what we deserve, but that, from God’s right hand, Jesus reigns in His Church with His grace, treating us kindly, helping us who suffer in our own temptation and who fall prey to the devil’s wiles. Indeed, in His means of grace, Jesus proclaims His victory over sin, death, and the devil. He washes us of every sin in Holy Baptism, and He promises to be with us even now, constantly forgiving the sins of repentant sinners, raising them back up to newness of life. And He feeds us with the very bread from heaven, His own body and blood, for our forgiveness, life, and salvation. We poor sinners adore the promises of included in these gifts, and they surely move us also to worship and rejoice.

Third, Jesus departs with the promise that He shall return. “*Men of Galilee,*” the angels announced, “*why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go*

*into heaven.*” For Christians, Jesus’ return is anticipated ... eagerly. He says, “*Surely I am coming soon,*” and we say, “*Amen. Come, Lord Jesus*” (Rev. 22:20).

To be sure, Jesus makes brief sorties back into the world, as the tribulations of this world become too much for our mortal bodies. We die, and our souls go to be with Jesus. We take comfort in Jesus’ promise here, too: “*In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also*” (John 14:2-3).

But Jesus’ ultimate return will be on the last day: then Jesus “*will descend from heaven*” (1 Thess. 4:16) — Jesus says, “*the Son of Man [will come] in clouds with great power and glory*” (Mark 13:26). He will come “*with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God*” (1 Thess. 4:16). Then, Jesus will raise up all the dead, and “*bring with him those who have fallen asleep*” in Him. Then, “*we shall be changed*”; then, “*this perishable body [will] put on the imperishable, and this mortal body [will] put on immortality*”; Then “*shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’*” Then shall our worship and our rejoicing know no end, for although “*[t]he sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law ... thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Cor. 15:52-57). Our victory is eternal life with Christ Jesus, our Lord. Again as we sang, “*Mighty Lord, in Thine ascension We by faith behold our own*” ... our own ascension to the Father.

And so this Ascension, we rejoice! “*God [our Lord Jesus Christ] has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet,*” but He has not left us alone. He has given us His Spirit of power; He has given us His grace; He has given us His promise to come again and take us to Himself. That’s a reason to “*worship him*” with all those who have gone before us, and “*continually*” to bless God. God grant it to us ...

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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