

May 9, 2024
The Ascension of our Lord
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Ephesians 1:15–23

WHERE IS THE HOPE?

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The historic Church properly calls today The Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord. It's one of the great festivals of the Church Year, although in recent decades, many congregations and many Christians have forgotten all about this important day. The Early Church regarded The Ascension as one of the major feasts of the Church Year. They would celebrate with *great joy* just as the disciples were full of joy after Jesus' Ascension. (cf: Luke 24:52) They would hold their worship services outside in the open air, maybe on a hill in the countryside. Some would have a procession to imitate Jesus' final journey with His disciples to the Mount of Olives where according to St. Luke:

"⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven." (Luke 24:51)

One might ask: "*What's the big deal? Two thousand years later, why should we continue celebrating the Ascension?*" The short answer is, *you and I need hope*. If you and I are to share in the great joy of the original disciples returning to Jerusalem immediately following Jesus' Ascension, *we need hope*. We live in a world full of depression and oppression, addiction and affliction, hatred and hostility, mistrust and murder. It's all around us – and Jesus' Ascension gives us *real hope*. When I say: "*The Ascension gives us real hope...*" don't let the word "*hope*" steal your joy by allowing *worldly hope* to be confused with *Christian hope*. *Worldly hope* and *Christian hope* are two different things.

The dictionary definition of the word "*hope*" is: "*a feeling of expectation and desire.*" (Concise Oxford English Dictionary) *Worldly hope* is a feeling... a fluttering sensation inside somewhere... a desire. It's like saying: "*I hope gas and food prices come back down. I hope it doesn't rain Saturday so I can mow my lawn. I hope my tomato plants produce better than last year.*"

But *Christian hope* is entirely different. *Christian hope* is having *confident trust* in what is not seen... confidence about this future. (cf: Romans 8:24–25; Hebrews 11:1) *Christian hope* is grounded on the promise of our Triune God, that for the sake of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, Christ will return in glory on the Last Day and bring all who believe into His new creation.

Worldly hope cannot be trusted. **Worldly hope** is **false hope** and **false hope** is **no hope** at all. **False hope** causes you to live your life trusting in lies. Many charlatans and false preachers deceive with **false hope**. They say: “Name it and claim it. Life your best life now. Love wins. Above all, God just wants you to be happy.” Cults and false prophets deceive with **false hope** by using mathematical calculations along with biblical events in history and recent wars and natural disasters to deceitfully predict the exact day of the end of the world, the battle of Armageddon, or the Second Coming of Christ. Gullible sheep are led astray, building their lives around the **hope** in something that turns out to be a lie.

Living in and embracing **false hope** has a great cost. It can lead to bitterness, disillusion, licentious living, and rebellion against God. In short, **false hope** leads to despair and unholiness.

As Jesus proclaimed:

“¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.” (Matthew 7:18)

In our epistle text tonight, St. Paul ties **real Christian hope** to Jesus, and specifically to His Ascension. And this is why we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord. In Holy Baptism God gave you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. He enlightened the eyes of your heart:

“... that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe...” (Ephesians 1:17–19)

In the washing of the water and the Word, you were given eyes of faith so that you have **hope... real Christian hope** for your own future. The Ascension message proclaims that Christ Jesus, God’s own Son who left heaven and came to earth in the flesh of man to save you and all mankind by His innocent suffering and death, having completed His mission of winning forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation for all mankind, God raised Him from the dead. Forty days later He ascended back into heaven where, according to St. Paul;

“[God] seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church.” (Ephesians 1:20–22)

Christ Jesus lives and reigns forevermore in human flesh and blood. His visible presence on earth may have ceased, but He does not cease to be with His earthly people. He comes to you exactly where He promises and works through His means of grace. In heaven He is preparing a place for all who believe. (cf: John 14:1–3) One day He will come again in glory to raise the living and the dead, and to place **death**, which is the final enemy, under His feet. (cf: 1 Corinthians 15:20–28)

And this is your **hope**. Because you are in Christ who has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep, (cf: 1 Corinthians 15:20) you have the promise of an eternal inheritance which has been guaranteed by Christ’s trailblazing journey through death into life and back into the heavenly places. (cf: Winger, Ephesians, Concordia Commentary, 260–

261) Christ is the Head, and we are members of the Body, the Church. If all things are under his feet, it means they will be under ours as well.

Jesus' Ascension gives you real *hope*. You know there is a God and that He loved you so much that He sent His Son to die for you and redeem you. You know that Son was crucified, died, and has ascended to rule over all things and be with us always as He promised, wherever two or three are gathered in His name, and in His Word of Absolution, forgiving you of placing your faith in *false hope*. He comes to you in the remembrance of your baptismal promises, in the proclamation of the Gospel, and in His body and blood in His holy Supper. His Ascension doesn't mean He is gone. It means He's present in all the places He said He'd be... in Word and Sacrament, and among His people.

There are many great festivals in the Church Year. Everyone loves Christmas, celebrating the birth of the Christ child. Our Lord's Passion and Easter resurrection assures us that Jesus' work of salvation on our behalf is finished, and the Father accepted His sacrifice. Pentecost marks the beginning of the Christian Church on earth. The Ascension of Our Lord is unique, in that its central message is *hope*. In the midst of living in a faithless and hopeless world, it centers our faith, strengthens us for the *hope* that lies ahead, and gives us the promise of a glorious eternal future.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.