

The Meaning of Jesus' Ascension
Sermon on Hebrews 9:24-28
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
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The Scriptures say: *God seated Christ at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come.* Amen.

God's special section of Scripture for us on this Festival of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ is Hebrews chapter nine, verses twenty-four through twenty-eight:

Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.

Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Introduction: We Confess, "He Ascended into Heaven...."

Dear fellow Christians—who have gathered to worship the ascended Christ:

Think of how often it is that you have confessed, "I believe that Jesus Christ ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and from there he will come to judge the living and the dead." Most of us have spoken those words hundreds of times. Many of us have confessed them thousands of times.

But we probably haven't pondered the implications of those parts of the creed nearly as often as we have considered some of the others. For example: "He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary"—we spend at least all of December every year on that. Or: "He was crucified, died, and was buried"—that takes up for us a couple months of every year, doesn't it?

Theme: The Meaning of Christ's Ascension

So today, let's take the unique opportunity afforded to us by this Festival of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's consider together: THE MEANING OF JESUS' ASCENSION. God's Word to us today lays it out rather nicely for us. Christ's ascension has meaning for us: in the (1) PAST, the (2) PRESENT, and the (3) FUTURE.

Part One: The Meaning of Christ's Ascension ... in the Past

God's Word to us today comes from the Epistle to the Hebrews. We don't know the human writer of these words. But finally, the author is actually the Holy Spirit himself. This letter was, no doubt, written to Hebrew Christians in Rome—and probably in the late sixties AD, some nearly forty years after Christ's ascension. These people were beginning to face persecution for being Christians. So, they were sorely tempted to revert to the entirely legal religion of Judaism. It was to counter that temptation that the

Epistle to the Hebrews was written. It declared that Christ is superior to anything contemporary Judaism ever offered.

Now like I said earlier, Jesus' superiority in this particular part of the epistle centers on his ascension. And his ascension has benefits for us that lie in the past, the present, and the future.

Take a look at the middle paragraph. It emphasizes to us the benefits of Christ's ascension in the past. First of all, it says that *Jesus entered heaven*. And when did Jesus enter heaven? Well, at least in the most visible way, it was when he ascended into heaven.

But what did he accomplish at that point? Well, let's take a look. It says: *Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.*

And every Christian who was born and raised as a Jew would have understood all of this. Every one of them understood that the special dwelling place of God on earth had been the back part of the temple in Jerusalem. Every one of them knew that he could never have visited God there. He couldn't enter the back part of the temple. He had never been in the front part of the temple—unless he had served as a priest. He had never even been close to the temple itself—unless he had served as a Levite.

But one day a year one guy did go back there. On Yom Kippur, the great Day of Atonement, sometime during the autumn of every year: in an elaborate ritual, the High Priest did go back into the Most Holy Place. He smoked it up with incense, so that he could not see the Ark of the Covenant: that two foot by two foot by four foot chest, overlaid with gold, overshadowed by angels—representing the presence of God. (Of course, by this time that ark had disappeared.) Still, on Yom Kippur, the High Priest poured out there the blood of a bull, which had died as the penalty for his sins, and afterwards the blood of a goat, which had died as the penalty for the people's sins.

And that happened every year: because every year the priest and the people sinned some more, and every year they needed their transgressions removed, and the sacrificial deaths of mere animals were never really permanent. By the time this Letter to the Hebrews was written, the sacrifice on Yom Kippur had repeated itself over the course of one thousand five hundred years! Ah but then, like it says here: "Christ" – our permanent High Priest – "appeared once for all" – not year by year by year – "at the end of the ages" – as the fulfillment of his Father's promise – "to do away with sin" – to delete sin – "by the sacrifice of himself" – not fifteen hundred bulls, not fifteen hundred goats, but by the blood and death of God himself.

And that's what Christ's ascension means to us ... in the past. Christ's ascension points back to Christ's sacrifice and says, "Mission Accomplished!" It's really true! God has accepted Christ's sacrifice for us, once and for all! As it says here, in the original language, he has "set at naught" our sin; we would say, "he has deleted our sin." Just the way you hit the delete key on your computer and things disappear—God hit our "delete key" Jesus, and our sins have disappeared. But better than what happens on a computer, our sins aren't just moved to a different file – the "garbage can", right? – no, our sins actually do disappear, really, forever.

That's what Christ's ascension means for us in the past! And doesn't it make you bold to believe?!

Part Two: The Meaning of Christ's Ascension ... in the Present

Now, what does Christ's ascension mean for us in the present? Well, take a look at the first paragraph—actually the first verse. *Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.*

Do you see what that says? That back part of the temple, the Most Holy Place, had been a picture of paradise—the special place where God dwells. But it was only a representation of heaven. And the high priest was only a representation of our real High Priest. And that high priest could only stay there briefly. If his people sinned the next day, the day after Yom Kippur, or if his people needed God's help that next day, the high priest was no longer there in God's presence to plead their case. Matters had to wait.

But our High Priest, Jesus Christ, has entered into heaven! Although he fills heaven and earth, and although he is specially present in Scripture and Sacrament and in the hearts of his people, Jesus Christ is especially specially present in the presence of God his Father! Whatever need we have—he is there to plead it for us!

And that's what Christ's ascension means to us ... in the present. If you or I sin today – and which one of us is not going to sin today? – if a mean thought crosses our mind, if a wicked word crosses our lips today, if our hands deliver a dirty deed: Christ has ascended! Our Savior is at the right hand of God! He turns to his Heavenly Father and says, "Remember, my Father, you cannot punish them; I've already suffered the penalty for their transgressions!" Or if you or I have a need today – if we're worried over some pain of ours, if we're worried over some relationship of ours, if we're worried over the future – Christ has ascended! Our Savior is at the right hand of God! He turns to his Heavenly Father and says, "Remember, my Father, you have to help them out; I have made them my friends and your children; I've bought them with my own blood!"

That's what Christ's ascension means for us in the present! And doesn't it make you bold to pray?!

Part Three: The Meaning of Christ's Ascension ... in the Future

Now, what does Christ's ascension mean for us in the future? Well, take a look at the last paragraph. *Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*

Do you follow the logic there? A person dies, and then he faces judgment—God judges his soul, immediately dispatching it to heaven or to hell. A person dies, and then he faces judgment; Jesus died, and now he'll bring the judgment—he'll return on the final day to judge people's bodies and souls, dispatching them eternally to heaven or to hell. And like it says here: "we are waiting for him", but better translated: "We eagerly anticipate his arrival"!

And that's what Christ's ascension means to us ... in the future. We eagerly anticipate his arrival!

Now, when we eagerly anticipate somebody's arrival, what does that mean? Well, it means we get ourselves ready in time. We make sure we aren't busy doing something else, when that special somebody arrives. And it's the same with Jesus. We make sure we're not caught off guard when he arrives—which could be any time. We make sure we're not in the process of gossiping—or shoplifting. We make sure we're not in the process of fornicating—or getting drunk. We make sure we're not in the process of committing some crime—or committing some sort of idolatry. That way we're ready whenever he comes.

And one other thing, when we eagerly anticipate somebody's arrival: it means we gather together those who might be interested in greeting his arrival with us. And it's the

same with Jesus. We want our wives or husbands, sons or daughters, moms or dads, to be ready for him. We want our other relatives, our friends, our classmates, our co-workers, our neighbors to be ready for him. We want the world to be ready for Jesus' arrival. And how is that going to happen? We ourselves need to be willing to remind them that Christ – our dear Savior from sin – is on his way!

That's what Christ's ascension means for us in the future! And doesn't it make you bold to speak?!

Conclusion: We Confess, “He Ascended into Heaven” for Us!

So, you see, it's very true what we frequently confess: “Jesus Christ ascended into heaven”—with his sin-deleting mission complete. “Jesus Christ is sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty”—where he intercedes continually for us. And “Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead”—which we eagerly anticipate.

You can count on that message! It's a message you can act upon. And be sure to share it, too! Amen.

The Scriptures say: *God placed all things under Christ's feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.* Amen.