



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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May 17, 2007

Festival of Ascension of Our Lord

Ephesians 1:16-23

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Psalm 68:15-20

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 47

Second Lesson: Ephesians 1:16-23

Gospel: Luke 24:44-53

The Ascended Christ Will Preserve His Church

Separation anxiety—being worried about being separated—did you ever have something like that? As a parent, when you put your child on the bus for the first day or dropped them off at school for their first day of Kindergarten, was there a little separation anxiety? As a child, did you feel that? Did you wonder how things were going to go?

There are different times in our lives when we face things like separation anxiety, but I'm pretty sure we'll never face it the way the disciples did at the Ascension. Can you imagine what they went through? The One they had seen raise the dead, heal the sick, calm the storms, the One they had seen come back from the dead now floats off into heaven and he says, "By the way, you are going to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth guys. See ya!" And his presence is gone. You have to wonder if those guys thought, "Okay. Now what?" as the angels tapped their jaws shut as they were dropped to their chest, and as they walked back to Jerusalem.

Maybe they started remembering some of Jesus' promises. "Stay in Jerusalem until I send you what the Father and I promised—the Holy Spirit—Pentecost." His presence might be gone, but his protection didn't leave them. That is what he had promised them—that he would be with them. That same promise applies to you and me as we go through this world today.

His visible presence may have departed, but his preservation of his church continues to the end of the world and as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he leads them by the hand of that glorious truth. The Ascended Jesus will preserve his church. He will preserve his church with his own power. Then here is the thing that is kind of unbelievable—he is going to preserve his church through his own people, frail, jars of clay that they may be. One of the ways that he preserves his church is through people like you and me.

Jesus will preserve his church. It's kind of interesting how this glorious truth comes out of this prayer that Paul speaks for the Ephesians. What I just read to you from Ephesians 1:16-23 that is printed there, that nice long paragraph—I don't know how many sentences it is in English—but actually in Greek, it's not even one complete sentence yet. He started it at verse 15 and it is one continuing sentence in Greek until the end of 23. Here is Paul. He has so much to say that it just comes tumbling out so fast, so many clauses, one after another about God's protection, Jesus' power and how

he wants the Ephesians to be plugged into that power. That is really the summary to what he writes to them there.

But he talks about—in the center of what we looked at—power; God’s incomparably great power for those who believe. The power that he exerted in raising Christ from the dead, the power he exerted in sitting him at the right hand of God, the power he exerts in ruling over all things for the benefit of the church—power, δυνάμιτος, dynamite is what he is talking about over and over and over in that section.

Power is an interesting thing, isn’t it? Don’t they say absolute power corrupts absolutely? Power sure has its allure and it sure leads us down paths we probably shouldn’t go. Power that an Upper Grade child has over a Lower Grade child sometimes makes them chase after silly things and then they all can sit back and giggle about how they are using their power to send these little children on an errand that is a fool’s errand.

Power is something that we covet, and we want our power to be recognized. When people don’t use our powerful ideas, then we go off and pout and stick our bottom lip out. We want people to notice our power, and we want to lord it over people at times. That is the way we are as sinners.

But do you notice Christ’s power? It’s completely and absolutely different. His power is used for the church. God has put him at the right hand of God—not a literal place. There aren’t three thrones in heaven with Jesus on the right and the Holy Spirit on the left. The right hand of God speaks of power and authority. He has authority over creation. He has put everything under his feet. He has his foot on everything. Everything is under his power. But instead of using it for whims, instead of using it to amuse himself, instead of using it as a play thing, he uses his power and love to rule for the benefit of the church.

If you don’t remember anything from Ephesians 1, you ought to remember that statement. That statement makes a difference as you go through your daily life. If you aren’t bright enough to hold on to it in the midst of the things we face in this world, then God help you because you are going to need his help and you are going to be missing it because you aren’t holding on to his promise. God rules over everything for the church. The power that raised him from the dead is the power that rules over all things for us. Not for himself—for us.

God’s power that created the world watches over everything for us. Here is a truth that makes a difference in daily life and yet, think of how often you and I—who think we know better than God—think that God should be using his power differently in this way or in that way, to remove this thing that troubles me or that thing that worries me. Think of how often you and I would like to tell God, “God you are screwing up here and here and there and there. Fix those and everything will be okay.” Think of how often we don’t just sit back and trust the One who loved us enough to die for us that he will be there for us, that he will sustain us, that he will lift us up; and the reason why is that all too often we don’t plug into his power, but we will come back to that.

But his power—through his very own power, he sustains the universe. Through his very own power, he tells us it is specifically there for you and me. He didn't abandon us and leave us on our own and tell us to do the impossible and go to the ends of the earth. He blessed us with the Spirit. He blessed us with the forgiveness of sins. He blessed us with the power of Word and Sacrament. He gave us his power to be at work among us. That tells us it will preserve his believers, because his church isn't a building; it's believers.

Do you have a shelf of vitamins at home? Do you have a shelf of medicine at home? Do you take it in the hopes of preserving yourself, making your life last longer? Our God has promised the One who is more powerful than anything that comes in a bottle is there to take care of us. That is a glorious truth that should comfort us and sustain us when days are dark and the darkness seems to linger. The God who loved us enough to stretch out his arms on a cross loves us enough to lift us up with those very same arms and preserve us in the faith until the end.

Did you ever start working with some kind of appliance or something that you turn on and nothing happens? Maybe you go and change a light bulb, if it's the lamp next to your table, and you turn it on, and still nothing. So then you resort to what every handyman knows. You hit it on the side a little because maybe that will help it. You turn it on, and still nothing happens. But then you look over your shoulder, and you look next to the wall, and there is the plug out of the outlet. Do you keep trying to slap it around to get it to start or to come on? Or do you bend over and take the little bit of time it takes and plug the plug into the outlet in the wall and then try again?

Well, I'm assuming you take the time to plug it in because you obviously see that is the way you are going to tap into the power. But too often you and I don't pay attention to what Paul prayed for the Ephesians. Too often you and I live with the plug on the floor next to the outlet. Paul wanted the Ephesians to know God more fully so their hearts may be enlightened. The heart wasn't just the seed of emotions for the people of Paul's day; it was also the source of the intellect. He wanted them to know something better. What he wanted them to know better was the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of revelation. The Spirit reveals the truth in Scripture. The truth and the revelation—the same thing—it's God's Word.

God wants to preserve his church through frail people like you and me, and the way he does it is by building us up through Word and through Sacrament—through the Gospel. I wonder if, at times, you and I don't go through life with the Bible on the coffee table, on the end table, on the shelf holding the clippings or whatever the case may be and don't plug into that power. Then do we wonder why we are worried and why we are stressed, why we don't have comfort and why we don't have peace? Here is this glorious truth God has told us again tonight. The One who made the earth rules over it and holds it in his hand for our benefit. Yet we worry because we don't plug into those promises. We sure can find times to plug in our television. We sure can find time to plug into other things, but his Word is where he is going to empower us so that he can preserve his church. Then, as he builds you and me up in that power, then we live our faith, as Paul thanked God that the Ephesians had done, so that we build one another up and we assure one another that when we have sinned, God still loves us and takes away those

sins. We encourage one another in the use of our gifts—not pointing out the flaws that we might have or how we could have done it better than what you did—but thanking God, like Paul thanked God for the Ephesians, that other Christians are serving with their gifts; thanking God that they also have that intense love for their Savior that burns in our hearts and that together, as we build up the body of Christ, the church grows as each part does its work.

That only comes about if we are plugged into the Word. In that Word we find a God who doesn't rebuke us because we haven't plugged in often enough. He simply says to us again, "I lived in your place. I died in your place. I've taken away your sins. You are my own. Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you. I will meet all your needs in Christ Jesus." That is what our God says to us over and over and over again.

A young man doesn't tire of hearing his sweetheart say, "I love you." In reality, you and I can never really grow tired of having God tell us that he loves us. The place he does that is in Word and Sacrament. That is the place where he preserves us so that we can then be preservatives in the world. We can be his salt and his light. We can share the Gospel message with the world that is perishing, a world that is obsessed with the here and now and doesn't have an idea that there is a day when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead.

So plug into that power. Trust that Christ rules over all things for your benefit even when your eyes can't see it. Believe in his love. That is the nature of faith—believing what you can't see. And know that he rules over all things right now for you.