

Ascension
Mark 16:14-20

"The Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to [His apostles], was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God." (Mk 16:19)

This event recorded in Mark, Luke, and Acts fulfilled the prophecy found in Psalm 110:

"The Lord says to My Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make Your enemies your footstool.'" (v. 1)

Jesus is the Lord and all authority in heaven and earth has been placed into His hands. This is what right hand means. Just as Joseph was the right hand of Pharaoh, Jesus is the right hand of God the Father. We err when we think of "right hand" as a physical location.

The greatest mystery of the church is the incarnation of Jesus. The second Person of the Trinity joined Himself to His creation and became a Man. As Paul says in Colossians:

"For in Him the whole fullness of the deity dwells bodily." (v. 9)

Jesus is fully God and fully Man. Right now, Jesus is fully God and fully Man. In this way, He becomes a stumbling block for the Jew and folly to the Gentile. But this is how Jesus is able to save the entire world. God could not bleed until He joined Himself to Man. But God did bleed on the cross and paid for the sin of the world. He covers your sin in water combined with His Word and feeds you with that very same blood in His Supper.

Because Jesus humbled Himself, enduring the suffering and the cross, submitting Himself to His Father's will, God the Father gave Jesus all authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus is in control of both the left-hand kingdom, or the world, and the right-hand kingdom, or the church. He is Lord over all.

Jesus doesn't tell us how He rules in the left-hand kingdom except through reason and the natural law. When kingdoms in the world use reason well and support natural law, also known as the law, written on our hearts, societies tend to flourish. Societies that honor life and families and promote justice for the widow, fatherless, and sojourner tend to do well. When kingdoms in the world pervert reason and support the desires of the flesh and justice only for the powerful, societies tend to fall apart. Societies that dishonor life and families and practice injustice to the widow, fatherless, and sojourner, do not do well at all and eventually fall.

The founding documents of our country are a great example of a country that uses reason well and supports natural law. In many ways today, the practice of our country shows an abandonment of reason and a defying of the natural law. Just as judgment came to Rome, German, and the Soviet Union, judgment will come upon our country. We don't know what it will look like because Jesus doesn't reveal to us how He rules the left-hand kingdom. History can reveal to us how Jesus has exerted His authority in the past, but only history will inform us of what He intends to do to the United States for its wickedness.

The last two presidential election cycles has shown to us that many have made politics their god. Many have put their fear, love, and trust in the political machine. Many made President Trump an idol. Many are making President Biden their idol. These are people who are looking for God's kingdom in an earthly kingdom. Jesus plainly says that the kingdom of God is not an earthly kingdom. He told Pilate that if His kingdom were of this world, He would have established it by overthrowing the Roman rule and would have created that kingdom in Jerusalem about 2,000 years ago. God warns you in Psalm 146:

Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man,
In whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs,
he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish. (vv. 3-4)

Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
Whose hope is in the Lord His God. (v. 5)

The Lord sets prisoners free;
The Lord opens the eyes of the blind;
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. (vv. 7b-8b)

The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Church, to all generations. (v. 10)

Put your trust in the Lord. He is also the Lord of the church. In the church, Jesus reveals plainly how He is working. He says plainly how He rules the church. We all call the church the kingdom of grace.

Jesus instituted clearly the gift of Holy Baptism for the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and your adoption as a son or daughter of God the Father. You are no longer a child of the world, but a pilgrim who travels through this world to the kingdom of glory.

Jesus instituted clearly the gift of preaching. Through the gift of preaching, we here God speaking to us today. Today is the day of salvation.

Jesus instituted clearly the gift of Holy Absolution. The gift of the pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins has been given to men so that you might have a clear conscience. We neglect this gift, but it is still available to us.

Jesus instituted clearly the gift of the Lord's Supper. He is bodily present under the consecrated bread and wine to give you His very own body and blood. He fills you with Himself so that you have the strength to sojourn through this life into the next where death becomes not something to fear, but merely a doorway to eternal life.

Jesus rules the right-hand kingdom and left-hand kingdoms with His grace and power. He promises that the rule of the left-hand kingdom serves the right-hand kingdom. When Paul says, “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called to His purpose,” it is not just a promise to the individual that he or she will die a blessed death firm in the faith. It is also a promise that the kingdom of power must serve the kingdom of grace. God’s Word has been and will continue to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. Sinners have been saved and will continue to be saved until Christ returns in glory. God’s kingdom of grace, also known as the church, will stand forever because it is founded on the rock, Jesus Christ. Jesus has defeated sin, death, and the devil. These will pass away, but Jesus, already having passed through death to life, will never pass away.

So, how are we to live in this world?

Luther answers this question in his treatise which every Christian should read, “On the Freedom of a Christian.” I don’t know if he intended to, but what he really does is expound Ephesians 2:8-10 which is dear to our hearts here at Grace:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Our vertical relationship, that is, our relationship with God, is composed of grace and faith and not works. God showers His grace upon us, especially in the Divine Service, and we look to Him for all good in faith. Works don’t enter the picture. God doesn’t need your good works. He wants your faith. That is, He wants you to fear, love, and trust in Him alone as your God.

God doesn’t need your good works, but your neighbor does. In fact, we show love to and for God by showing love to and for our neighbor.

Before God we are all equal. No one is greater or lesser than another. Before others in this world, we have stations and count others as greater than ourselves. Children serve and obey, love and cherish their parents as unto the Lord. Workers work and serve their bosses as if they are serving the Lord Jesus Christ. Wives serve and respect their husbands as unto the Lord. Husbands serve and love their wives as unto the Lord. Christians serve their neighbors by protecting and improving their neighbor's physical bodies, property, reputation, and income. Christian good works look simple and humble to the world, but shine in glory before the Lord.

Today, we celebrate our Lord's ascension. He is not up there far away in some by and by place but rules His creation directly. He rules the world with His power and rules His church with His grace. We have great joy in our Lord's ascension. What have we to fear?

Do you need to fear sin? Even if your sin is blacker than the blackest of nights, it is covered by the forgiveness of Christ.

Do you need to fear Satan? He is constrained by our Lord. Even if he is allowed to touch you physically, he cannot hurt your soul. He is defeated!

Do you need to fear men? Even the most powerful and evil of men die. They may rule for a time, but nothing done outside of Christ stands.

Now we see in a mirror dimly. God's rule in the world is not always clear to us. God's rule in the church is clear even though it seems corrupt at times. Jesus promises that He is coming back in glory. We will clearly see all His enemies put under His feet. We will see our Lord face to face! Then we will see clearly all that the Lord has done for us.

May our Lord keep you firm in your faith until you see Him face to face.

In Jesus' name. Amen.