

“Up, Up, and Away?”

“So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs.” (Mark 16:19-20, ESV)

“Up, up, and away” are the title and words from a popular song years ago. They are also what the fictional hero Superman used to say before flying away. But are they words that apply to the ascension of Jesus Christ? Well, Luke tells us that ***“[Jesus] led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:50-51, Modern English Version)***. Luke also wrote that ***“while they looked, [Jesus] was taken up. And a cloud received Him from their sight” (Acts 1:9, Modern English Version)***.

The words “up, up, and away” seem to fit the description of Jesus’ ascension as recorded in the New Testament. But the essential question is what does “away” mean when it comes to the ascension of our Lord? When Superman went away, he left the scene – perhaps to rescue someone or fight crime elsewhere, or maybe to return to being Clark Kent. Once he went away, Superman was no longer in the location from which he left. Similarly, if you took off for a ride in a hot air balloon you would no longer be at the launch site.

So, what do we mean by “away” as it applies to the ascension of our risen Lord and Savior? And can we harmonize this with Jesus’ promise: ***“I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b, ESV)***? Well, ***“a cloud received [Jesus] from their sight” (Acts 1:9, Modern English Version)***. He moved away from them and was no longer visible to them. But does Jesus’ ascension mean that He is no longer bodily present with us in this world? Unbelievers obviously reject the idea that Jesus is still with us in this life. Sadly, though, even some Christians also mistakenly think that He isn’t bodily present in this world. But the ascension doesn’t mean that Jesus is no longer with us.

Discussing false teaching about Jesus’ ascension, the *Book of Concord* (which is *The Lutheran Confessions* that we LCMS Lutherans subscribe to unconditionally as the true exposition of the Bible) says: ***“It is taught that because of His ascension into heaven, Christ is enclosed and restricted by His body in a definite place in heaven. He cannot or will not be truly present with us in the Supper, which is celebrated according to Christ’s institution on earth. But He is as far and remote from it as heaven and earth are from each other. Some Sacramentarians have willfully and wickedly falsified the text ‘Christ must occupy heaven’ (see Acts 3:21) for the confirmation of their error. Instead of this translation they have rendered it ‘Christ must be received or be restricted and enclosed by heaven or in heaven,’ so that in His human nature He can or will in no way be with us on earth” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article 7, Line 119. Quoted from Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, Second Edition. Concordia Publishing House, Copyright 2005, 2006, p. 580).***

Non-Christians obviously don’t believe that Jesus is God or that He rose from the grave and ascended into heaven forty days later. So, the words I just quoted mean little to them. Some who confess Christ, though, do wrongly view the ascension just as the *Formula of Concord* describes above. And those holding such a position as stated above do not believe that the risen Christ can

be bodily present in the Lord's Supper. But please understand that the *Formula of Concord* opposes the understanding that I quoted above – it is describing doctrine that Lutherans reject. For the words I quoted above are the *Formula of Concord's* polemical response against the false understanding of Jesus' ascension and not what Lutherans confess to be true about our Lord's ascension. For the truth is that Jesus can be (and truly is) bodily present in the Sacrament. For Jesus said: ***“Take and eat. This is My body.... Drink of it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:26-28, Modern English Version).***

And Jesus' presence in the Word and the Sacraments (also known as the Means of Grace) is impossible for our minds to completely grasp and fully explain. But then again, so is Scripture's teaching that Christ received all of God's punishment on the cross and bodily rose to everlasting life three days later. No human being can adequately explain or fully comprehend how these things can happen. Likewise, the risen ***“Lord Jesus... taken up into heaven and [sitting] down at the right hand of God”*** is no less miraculous and no easier for our fallen human reason to accept. Nevertheless, we trust that Jesus is faithful to His promise to be ***“with [us] always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b, ESV).*** The apostles trusted Jesus' Word and Mark tells us that ***“the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs”*** as ***“they went out and preached everywhere.”***

My brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus has ascended – a glorious event that we remember and celebrate this month. And He did so for us. One could say that He is “away” in that He is not visibly present among us. But Jesus is not “away” in the sense that He is no longer with us. He certainly is with us. For the ascended Lord is bodily present among us – serving His church with His saving gifts. And He will continue to be with us until He returns visibly on the Last Day to raise the dead and take His church to live with Him forever in glory.

Our Lord's ascension is a wonderful blessing. Jesus isn't a comic book character. He also hasn't departed on a long aerial trip and therefore can no longer be among us. He loves us greatly and continues to abide with His church. “Up, up, and away?” Well, Jesus has ascended. But He hasn't left us or abandoned us. He comes with His cross-won forgiveness, salvation, and unending life through His Gospel in the Word and Sacraments. What a great reason to worship on the Day of Ascension and on every Lord's Day. See you at church.

In Christ,
Pastor

PS – We will celebrate the Ascension of our Lord with a joint worship service at St. John's on Thursday, May 14th. Worship begins at 7PM. Hope you will be able to join us ~ Pastor.