

John 17:11b-19

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Series B) - Ascension

Lessons for the Day: Acts 1:12-26; 1 John 5:9-15; John 17:11b-19

Never Out of Sight

May 16, 2021

“Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

This past Thursday, the 40th day after Easter, the church once again marked the Ascension of our Lord, rejoicing that the Victorious Saviour has returned to His Father and to His true heavenly home, to rule over all things for the sake of His Church. In our day and age, we often observe this day more in absence than in fact, but the Scriptures note the importance of that day when Jesus took His followers out to a hillside, and while speaking to them and blessing them, He was taken up from them into heaven.

It must have been rather difficult for the disciples to accept the fact that the Lord, who had been taken from them in death and yet was again with them after He rose from the dead, now had to leave them again. Why couldn't He—or why didn't He—stay in this world, where we need Him so much? What a blessing it would be to see and talk and counsel with Jesus the way that Peter, James, John and the other disciples did. Wouldn't it be nice, when we are confused by so many things that shake our world, from COVID to—well, you fill in the blank—if we could just talk to Jesus, face to face? When we are struggling with the pains and illness of our lives, wouldn't it be nice if we could have Jesus lay His hand on us as He did for the leper or for the lame or the blind? Wouldn't it be good to have Him put His arm around us when we are overwhelmed or lonely or afraid?

Our text today comes from some of the last words that Jesus spoke in the presence of the disciples before His crucifixion. They are part of the prayer we refer to as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. In these words, Jesus prays for His disciples, including us, as He looks ahead to the time when His presence with them would be different. To be honest, there are some unnerving or unsettling thoughts that come out in these words. Jesus speaks about the world hating us, because we are not of the world. He prays for the protection we will need from the evil one. And it almost seems like He is throwing us to the lions, because rather than taking His followers out of this world that hates us, He sends us out into the world, to be His messengers of hope and forgiveness to the very world that hates us.

I don't think that the disciples understood all that Jesus was saying, but Jesus prayed for them, and for us, because He knew that His followers would come to know just what it meant to be hated by the world. They would see Satan working against the Gospel—both through the persecution of the Church, and through the false teachings that would deny the truth of the Gospel. Sadly, not much has changed, except maybe for the worst. The devil is still at work in the world, teaching the world to hate the people of God and all they represent. Statistically, more Christians have died for their faith in the past 100 years than in the entire history of the Church—and those statistics continue to grow. Around the world, more than 340 million Christians live in places where they experience high levels of persecution, just for following Jesus. That's 1 in 8 believers, worldwide.

We also see the devil's evil influence in our lives. He works in countless ways to tempt us and mislead us. He tries to make our lives miserable with a thousand different ailments, misfortunes, troubles and worries. We see him at work in the attitudes of society today. In the US, the Congress is debating the Equality Act. The Equality Act sounds innocent. People should be given equal protection and rights under the law. But in elevating sexual orientation to a protected class, this act will bring sweeping changes to current laws, to the great detriment of the religious and

constitutional freedoms of biblically faithful churches, institutions, Christian schools and individuals. In other words, to speak of homosexuality as sinful would be illegal. We do not hate or persecute homosexuals. We hate sin, but reach out in love to sinners, so that they might know the power of forgiveness and new life free from sin through faith in Jesus Christ. The church, when it is faithful to the whole of Scripture will call homosexuality sin—just as we call drunkenness or abuse or adultery sinful. But the world doesn't like that message, and it is lashing out against the church. Isn't that what Jesus told us would happen? Only God knows what is yet to come. But as long as this world exists, the devil will continue his evil—and that evil will mean struggle and hardship and suffering for the people of God.

When Jesus is near, we have every reason for confidence and hope. When the disciples were terrified by the storm on the lake, the presence of Jesus calmed their fears—and then He acted to silence the wind and waves. When He was arrested in Gethsemane, He spoke in defence of His disciples, so that they may go free. Again and again, when Jesus is near, things change and they work for the best. And he did say: ***While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me.***

The problem, at least as we see it, is that the devil is at work here in this world—but the Saviour has ascended into heaven. The fact that Jesus did ascend into heaven doesn't mean that He has left us or that He isn't with us. It doesn't keep Him from knowing our needs or caring about the things that happen to us. Nothing could be further from the truth! The ascension doesn't take Jesus from us. He hasn't gone missing. The good news is that the Ascended Lord has the power to be in one place and in multiple places at the same time. He reigns at the right hand of God the Father as the Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent God the Son, but continues to be the Son of man who is with us always, just as He promised. Jesus declares: ***“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”*** (Matthew 18:20, ESV) Yes, His presence may be different, yet His Divine presence and His almighty power are with us every day, working all things together for our good. More than that, we can find comfort in knowing this: the ascended, Living Lord, from His vantage point in heaven sees and knows all the things that affect our lives. We are never out of His sight, as He rules over all things in heaven and earth for the sake of the people He loves.

And He does love us! Let's not lose sight of why He came into this world in the first place. He knew full well what sin was doing to His beloved people, that we are sinners, doomed to destruction because we are enslaved by the devil. But, we are assured in Scripture: ***“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”*** (Hebrews 2:14–15, ESV) He came to deliver us from sin, death and hell itself. His death brought our freedom. His resurrection is the assurance of our rising to life with Him. His ascension is our assurance that He is watching over all things in heaven and earth, working everything together for the good of His people.

The ascension does not mean that Christ has left us. It simply means that He has a different vantage point from which to deal with us. When we confess that Jesus ascended to the right hand of God, we are not referring to a location. God's right hand is a position of power and authority. It does not localize Jesus. It universalizes His presence. God's power is everywhere. He promises us: ***“behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*** (Matthew 28:20, ESV)

During World War II, an ocean liner left England to sail to the United States. Enemy submarines and cruisers sailed those same waters and put the ship in danger. Therefore, the captain was given secret directions, charting his route. Added to these were the instructions: “Keep straight on this course. Turn aside for nothing. If you need help, send a wireless message in code.” After a few days out at sea, the crew spotted an enemy cruiser on the horizon. It appeared to be tailing them. The captain immediately sent the coded message: Enemy cruiser sighted. What shall I do? The reply came from an unseen ship: Keep straight on. I am standing by. No friendly vessel could be seen, but the captain kept the liner on course until it reached port. Within a short time, a British warship slipped into the same harbour. Although it had been out of sight, it had protected the passenger vessel during the entire voyage.

We have an even greater presence of the Lord. In His Word, the living Lord comes to us again and again to comfort us, to strengthen us, to encourage us. When we come to His Supper, Christ is truly present to assure us of His forgiveness, love and help. We are never out of His sight and faith knows He is never out of our sight, either! He walks with us. He will help us. Life in this sinful world will not be easy. I don't think we can ever say it better than Paul did

when he says: *“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:38-39, ESV)