

Ascension Day May 24 2020
Luke 24:44-53
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace to you and peace from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; one God, now and forever. Amen.

Then he [Jesus] said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God. Let's pray:

Guess what, Saints!?! We're rich! Each one of you is officially "worth" A\$4.9 million. No, really! I'm not kidding. Earlier this week, I read an interesting article written by co-contributors, Richard Holden of the University of New South Wales, Bruce Preston of the University of Melbourne, and Dr Jen Schaefer of the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. In it, they explain how the Australian Government applies a cost-benefit analysis calculation to inform their policy-making decisions.

This is how it has been applied in the current lockdown: 'To be able to weigh the value of a life against the economic costs of forgone output from lost jobs and business closures, requires placing a dollar value on one person's [read *unit of productivity's* – my words] life. This number is called the value of a statistical life.

In Australia, the Government generally uses a value of A\$4.9 million' (Abovementioned authors, *The Conversation*, May 16, 2020 8.35am AEST). Without going into the nitty-gritty, basically, by locking down and not losing too many lives, the country saves a lot of money. So, congratulations Saints, you're worth a fortune. Eric (our treasurer), will be relieved to hear this, I'm sure. Who will we sell first? I'm kidding!

Now, let's flip the coin and look at the other side. In the latest edition of *Fire* (Asia Focus Australia April/May 2020 No 85), the harsh reality of being considered worthless in the eyes of one's government stands in stark contrast to our own situation. My dear friend, Pastor James San Aung writes:

'In Paletwa, the heartland of MLC (MYANMAR LUTHERAN CHURCH), with its Khumi people, things are grim. Civil War is raging there every day, every week, every month. Just yesterday four people were shot dead, in my home town . . . Reports of atrocities, bombings, my people being driven out of their villages come in all the time. Now A SECOND ENEMY has just arrived, an even worse one: the Covid-19 virus.' His next words brought tears to my eyes: *'I have no word to add to my unceasing tears that flow from my eyes except asking God please help our Khumi people in Paletwa, Chin State.'*

Sadly, it appears that the lives of our brothers and sisters in Paletwa, have little, if any, statistical value.

We live in a world in which up is better than down. Singers want to be at the top of the charts, athletes want to be on top of their game, and students want to be at the top of the class. Everyone would rather have an up day than a down day. When our investments rise, we celebrate; when they crash, we despair. No one wants to be at the bottom of someone's list. We work to climb, not to descend the career ladder. We hear and read about mountain climbers but not much is said or written about cave expedition leaders.

What drives our behaviour is the desire to live ascended lives. We want to break free from the things that hold us down and rise above it all. There's nothing wrong with that. In fact, it's right. Something within us knows that we're more than earthbound creatures. The problem is that we've distorted what ascension and an ascended life mean. We forget, or perhaps deny, that when Christ ascended to the Father, he sat humanity down next to God. If we deny this is true, we leave ourselves the perilous, in fact, impossible task of attempting to self-ascend, to strive to achieve something that Jesus has already done for us.

This distortion has invaded our theology and understanding of God. The devil would have us believe that God, heaven, and holiness are up there somewhere while we're stuck down here. Subsequently, we spend our time jumping up and down like I did as a little child thinking if I jumped hard enough, high enough, and fast enough, I would be able to touch the moon. (What?! You think I was a warped child?) It inevitably involves comparison, competition, and judgement of some kind. We compare ourselves and our lives with other people and their lives. We compete with each other believing that for us to ascend, the other has to descend or at least not jump as high. We are forever judging ourselves and one another. We fill our lives with busyness hoping to climb to new heights. But it's never enough. A life of self-ascension keeps us always searching for the next high.

This shooting for the heights; our attempts at self-ascension, fragment our world and our lives. They separate the creature from the Creator. They destroy relationships and intimacy. Ultimately, they become the gravity that prevents us from living the ascended life we are seeking. The silly thing is, it's a life that in reality is a gift that we already possess.

Jesus' ascension reshapes our skewed understanding of an ascended life. His ascension is the antidote to the fragmentation and separation of self-ascension. Through him we too can live authentic, ascended lives because Jesus' ascension is not about his absence; about his distance from us, rather, it's about his presence.

It's not about his leaving but about "the fullness of him who fills all in all." It's not about a location but about a relationship. Presence, fullness, and relationship must surely be what lie behind the question of the two men in white, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven" (Acts 1:10-11)? It's as if they're saying to us, "Don't misunderstand and disfigure this moment. Don't deny yourselves the gift that is being given to you." "Don't look in the wrong place."

The ascension of Jesus completes the resurrection. His resurrection "has brought us back from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness . . . [purchased] not with silver and gold but with his own precious blood" (*The Large Catechism*). And his ascension "keeps us there" (ibid.). It lifts humanity up to heaven. Jesus' ascension seats human flesh, your flesh and my flesh, at the right hand of God the Father. To quote Joseph Fiennes from the film, *Luther*: "His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God, and where He is, there I shall be also!" (*Luther*, starring Joseph Fiennes, 2003).

Dear Saints, the ascension is more about letting go, than reaching and grasping. The question for us is not, "How do we ascend?" That has already been accomplished. "It is finished." The question is: "What pulls us down?"

What do we need to let go of? Fear, anger, resentment, or bitterness often weigh us down. The need to be right or be in control is a heavy burden. For some, self-righteousness, jealousy, or pride is their gravity. For others, old, unattended wounds bring heaviness. Many of us will be tangled in the net of perfectionism and the need to prove we are enough. For others it may be indifference or apathy. Far too many lives are imprisoned by addiction. Gravity takes many forms and I wonder, what is the gravity that denies you Jesus' ascension?

Friends, the gravity that keeps us down is not to be found in creation or the circumstances of our lives. Gravity is not around us but within us.

So, as you begin to look at your life and identify the places of gravity, don't despair. The very things that hold us down, serve to drive us to the cross which points the way to ascension and peace.

Our participation in Jesus' ascension begins not by looking up, but by looking within. I don't say this to promote self-indulgence. Far from it. Rather, I want you to look within and see heaven; where our Father sits in his temple with Jesus at his right hand. 'For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people"' (2 Corinthians 6:16). To both A\$4.9 million and little statistical value I say, "Bah humbug!" God's ascended children are priceless. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.