

The Ascension of Our Lord (Observed); May 29, 2022
+ Luke 24:44-53 +
“Jesus Lifts up His Hands”

He said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.”

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. He said to them, “This is what is written and so it must be: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. Look, I am sending you what my Father promised. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

He led them out as far as the vicinity of Bethany. He lifted up his hands and blessed them. And while he was blessing them, he parted from them and was taken up into heaven. So they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. They were continually in the temple courts, praising and blessing God. Amen.

“The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace. Amen.” Those are the familiar words of the Aaronic Benediction. Not ironic, but Aaronic; they’re the benediction, or blessing, of Aaron. We can trace their use as a blessing over God’s people all the way back to Moses’ brother Aaron, the first high priest of Israel. In Numbers chapter 6 Moses tells us that God instructed Aaron and his sons to announce those words to the people and promised that when he did, God would bless them. Whenever Aaron blessed the people, he did it **lifting up his hands toward the people**. (Leviticus 9:22)

But Aaron wasn’t the only one to lift up his hands as he blessed God’s people. The priests who followed him carried on the tradition. Still today, pastors around the world raise their hands in blessing at the end of worship and speak those very same words.

But when you hear those words at the end of worship today, and then again in the weeks and years to come, don’t think of my hands, or Aaron the high priest’s hands. Think about the Lord who told Aaron to raise his hands and speak those words. It was the Lord who said, **“So [the priests] will put my name on them, and I will bless them.** (Numbers 6:27) But also think of the Gospel we heard this morning. Think about Jesus and his hands as he lifted them up and blessed his people. When you receive the Lord’s blessing, think of Jesus’ ascension.

Today’s Gospel actually covers a pretty long period of time. It opens midway through Jesus’ Easter Sunday visit to his disciples. He came to them and said, **“Peace be with you.”** He showed them his hands and feet, and ate food in front of them to assure them that it was really him, and he was really alive. Then he helped them understand what had happened: **He said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.”**

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. He said to them, “This is what is written and so it must be: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are

witnesses of these things. Look, I am sending you what my Father promised. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

The next paragraph takes us forty days into the future: **He led them out as far as the vicinity of Bethany. He lifted up his hands and blessed them. And while he was blessing them, he parted from them and was taken up into heaven. So they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. They were continually in the temple courts, praising and blessing God. Amen.**

Were there any other times Jesus lifted up his hands over his disciples? It’s possible, but this is the only occasion where the Gospel writers tell us it happened. Why did Jesus do it? What does it mean? When we look closely at Jesus’ Easter Sunday words, there are two main messages that his uplifted hands communicate. First, God had remained true to his promise of salvation, completing in Jesus the necessary sacrifice for our sins. Second, God does not lie. He will give us the power we need to carry out the work he has given us. He’s promised to do it. And he will.

When Jesus lifted up his hands, imagine the powerful visual reminder of the sacrifice he had made. The hands he lifted up were marked, scarred where the nails had held him to the cross. Just as he proclaimed on that Easter evening, he really had fulfilled what was written about him in the books of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms. He had taken the sins of all on himself, and given himself as the payment for those sins. Yet, death was not the victor. Because now blood was again coursing through those nail-marked, once-dead hands. The grave could not hold him. Jesus was – and still is – the victor. He is triumphant. And his salvation work has been accepted.

When you receive the Lord’s blessing, receive it knowing that you are God’s own. You are his own because your Savior sacrificed himself for you. Now, as you daily confess your sins to God, be confident that the blood of Jesus has purified you. As surely as Jesus was standing in front of his disciples, he still stands in heaven, with those living, nail-pierced hands before the Father’s throne. Through his sacrifice, you are now the Father’s child. See it Jesus’ uplifted, scarred but living hands.

And, just as surely as Jesus was standing there before him, just as surely as his disciples were to believe they were forgiven, they were also to believe that it was their work to preach that message of forgiveness to others.

Calling sinful men and women to do that work is asking a lot. If you’ve ever felt less than qualified to do that work, you’re not alone. But that’s alright, because there’s also another way in which we’re not alone. We go out with God’s power.

Jesus told his disciples on Easter Sunday that they were going to be his witnesses. Just as the Father had sent him to bring salvation to all people, he was now sending them to proclaim to all the message of salvation. But, he said, don’t go just yet: **“Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”**

As Jesus raises his hands in blessing, he reminds us that the power to accomplish all that he has given us to do is power that comes from above us. He lifts up his hands to the place he is about to ascend, and where he is still seated at the Father’s right hand. From his Father’s side, he sends to us the Holy Spirit, too. He sends us the Spirit through his Word and Sacraments, to empower us to use our mouths to witness all that he has done for us.

On Pentecost he sent the Holy Spirit to his disciples, to educate them and to give them the will to go out and do that work. He is still sending his Spirit to us, to educate us with the Word and strengthen our souls. He does this so that we will be his witness, not just in what we say, but also in what we do. As the disciples returned to Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension and filled their days with worship and praise, we will too.

Each week, you leave these doors and head out into a world that needs to hear about Jesus. You go out with the peace of forgiveness, as well as the invitation to share Jesus' peace with all people. You go with the blessing Jesus pours out on through his Word, to live and act according to God's will.

Yet, we are not perfect at this. We fail each day to make the best of our opportunities to speak and act as Jesus' witnesses. We fail to be – in everything that we say and do – faithful witnesses to Jesus. And so we need each week the blessing and power that we find as we gather here to celebrate this great truth of Easter: God keeps his promises. He promised his grace for sinful people, and kept that promise.

Our worship, focused on God's Word and his Sacraments, places before our eyes the death and resurrection our Lord through which he redeemed and restored us. And, each week, as our worship concludes with God's blessing, we're reminded: **He led them out as far as the vicinity of Bethany. He lifted up his hands and blessed them. And while he was blessing them, he parted from them and was taken up into heaven.**

When you receive that blessing, look past my hands to the cross of Christ. Remember the hands of your Savior that were pierced for you there. And, as you leave, remember three Ascension promises. First, the one we heard in this morning's Verse of the Day: **"Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."** (Matthew 28:20b) That is what Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection means for you. No matter what you are going through, you are not alone. Jesus, your loving Savior who died for you, lives again to be with you always.

The second promise is one we've already seen this morning. He has promised to send his Holy Spirit to be with you, strengthening you for the work he has given you to do. He sends his Spirit through his Word, which is your shield and weapon as you confront the evils of the world, as well as your strength to do the work of witnessing that your Savior has given you.

Third and finally, Jesus points us passed today and this week and this life, to the life to come: **"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you."** (John 14:1-2) Everything Jesus accomplished was for a singular purpose: so that you and I would dwell with him forever in our heavenly home. He promises that he is there right now preparing a place for us. And he continues: **"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with me, so that you may also be where I am."** (John 14:3) Your Savior promises: I have not left you. And I will return to gather you into my arms and take you to be with me always.

God keeps his promises. Easter and ascension are proof of so many already kept. As you receive the Lord's blessing at the of this worship, remember his promises to you, and the truth that his resurrection and ascension proclaim: God keeps his Word. His promises are true. In Christ he has kept his promise to save you. And he keeps his promise to empower you to witness to that truth. Amen.