

The Ascension of Our Lord – 2024

Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

It hasn't always been as difficult as it is now. Perhaps this is just a season of deeply unwise ideas having their moment in the sun. Perhaps we will go back to saner perspectives once again carrying the day. Trying to understand, let alone endorse, what is going on in the world can make you cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. The world is not aging gracefully. God surely is teaching Christians a very important lesson. On multiple fronts, we are a highly favored people. There are certain ideas that are crystal clear in the mind of contemporary Christians that may not always have been so. Ultimately, this is a great blessing. Here's an idea that is crystallizing itself more and more in my mind: "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." St. Paul wrote that. St. Paul tucked that priceless sentiment into his letter to the Colossians. Here's the full quote: "If then (as is the case) you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:1-3).

What do you think of that? Perhaps you'll say, "Well, I'm a realist. I live in a real world with real responsibilities and I have to interact with real people who are going about their real lives and we all have to pay our real bills and raise our real children and put real food on our real tables. Things on earth are real and I have to set my mind on them in order to be functional, productive." Yep; all that is quite true. God did indeed give you your real vocation and He expects you to be mindful of it. And yet Jesus said this: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). Your heavenly Father knows what you need in life and how you are to fulfill your calling, and that entails earthly, legitimate endeavors. Seek first, Him! Set your mind on things above! It is God and His Word, God and His Spirit who forms your mind, forms your faith. He wants you to see more than just your earthly situation. Once you see more, then you will be of more use to those around you, you will be stronger in perspective and better able to handle the storms of life.

Peter had his mind filled with earthly things and suffered a terrible rebuke from our Lord. Peter's perspective was informed by worldly principles, worldly notions of power and glory and success. Jesus told Peter that He, the Lord, would suffer. Peter rebelled and his earthly notions spilled out of his mouth. God's ears, Jesus' ears were afflicted with Peter's drivel. The Lord's diagnosis was swift: "You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (Matthew 16:23). If ever there was a widespread contemporary malady, that's it. Alright; so what does it mean to "set your mind on the things that are above, not on earthly things?" Today, we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord. Forty days after Easter, the Lord of the cross takes our humanity into heaven. That had always been the plan. Before the Son of God was conceived, before the foundation of the world, the Messianic King had intended to assume our humanity, to live a perfect life, to offer His life, His body as a sacrifice for sins, to rise again for our justification, and to ascend back to heaven – that is the plan, that is the construction of His kingdom, that is journey that we've been grafted into.

This world is broken. It will not endure. God will fold this world up on the Last Day. Earth will be no more. Heaven is our home. Our Savior came from there. He established His church and He is taking her to be with Him. Set your mind on things above. He has said to you, quite clearly, “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). “Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms” (John 14:2). By taking your humanity to the right hand of God, a place has been prepared for you. In great love, Jesus has arranged for your arrival in paradise. His death has paid for your sins. The glorious righteousness of the Son of God is credited to your account. Faith; God has breathed into you a living faith in the crucified and risen King. His kingdom is not of this world. Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things.

People often debate about the veracity of God’s Word, debate the trustworthiness of the Christian narrative. Typically, doubters have their mind set on earthly things. Here’s something to consider: To announce what Jesus would do, God set up a festival in the OT: Yom Kippur – The Day of Atonement. On Yom Kippur, the High Priest would go into the Most Holy Place to atone for the sins of the people. He would take the blood of a bull, the blood of a sacrificial offering, and smear the blood on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant – on the atonement cover, a special place called “The Mercy Seat.” That act, that ritual pointed forward to Christ and His Ascension. Thousands of years before the Son of God was made man, God instituted a rite in the OT that captured the essence of Jesus’ Ascension. The Temple, Scripture says, the Temple is a picture of heaven (Hebrews 9). The Most Holy Place, within the Temple, was an earthly structure that was meant to teach us about Christ and His sacrifice. Jesus goes into heaven, not with the blood of a bull or a goat, but with the evidence of His own sacrifice, His wounds (Hebrews 9:24). Jesus appears before our Father on our behalf. Our Great High Priest intercedes on our behalf before the Father’s throne (Romans 8:34). Set your minds on things above. That is an argument about the veracity of Christianity that was thousands of years in the making and it goes largely ignored.

We are highly favored. God is clearly focusing our minds on more important matters than this earthly realm. We might be in for a rough ride, humanly speaking. How many of y’all want to be strong if things in this world fall apart? Or would you rather be like children, tossed to and fro by every wind of spiritual fallacy and subject to the human cunning of deceitful men, subject to the schemes of profiteering dooms-dayers? (Ephesians 4:14). We set our minds on things above. We pray for His kingdom to come to us, to abide with us, to protect and defend us. We pray that His will be done on earth as it so clearly is done in heaven. We pray for stout hearts, that we not be fair-weather Christians but be prepared to let our light shine even should the storms of earthly life become intense and Christians become scapegoats, pariahs. It could very well be that the remarkable privilege is given to us to stand in the Last Days. To stand, we set our minds on things above.

And it’s a curious thing, ironic and counterintuitive and curious. Jesus brought His kingdom here, down to earth. He is here, with us, reigning as the eternal King of cross and tomb. And we find Him here, in Word and Sacrament, and He shepherds us here, in this meadow of grace. And we are to set our minds on things above. The things of heaven come into this realm through God’s appointed means. Christ ascended and is seated at the right hand of the Father and He is still among us as One who serves (Luke 22:27). The bible says that we have been seated with

Christ in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6). There is such an organic unity between all believers and the Lord Christ that we have ascended with Him. Our life is there – in heaven. It may be in the future but it is most certainly there. We apprehend Christ the King in our midst *and* we set our minds on things above.

As realists, we have miles to go before we sleep. As disciples, we must do the work that God has given us while it is day before night comes when no one can work (John 9:4). And the work that God has given us is to love Him with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind (Matthew 22:37). The work that God has given you is to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39). When you set your mind on things above then this will come naturally. Do it. Work at it. Apply yourself to the things above, where Christ is seated. His ascension into heaven has prepared a place for you. His resurrection has prepared a place for you. His death on the holy cross has prepared a place for you. His perfect life has prepared a place for you. His Incarnation has prepared a place for you. Your baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection has prepared a place for you. His body and blood feeds you and nourishes you as you make your way home. Set your mind on things above and look for the Ascended Lord here.