

1 John 4:17-18

This past Thursday may have been just another weekday—a day of work for most of us, but for the Church it's the day we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord. Forty days after Easter Jesus took His small band of disciples to a hill outside of Jerusalem, and while they were looking on He ascended bodily into heaven. To which we respond: "A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing!" It is reason to celebrate and give thanks. And yet, there are Christians who ask, "Why celebrate? It is not an occasion of joy, but one of sadness. Jesus left us! Why celebrate over that?"

They are right, and they are wrong. If Jesus had truly left us, then they are right—it would not be an occasion for joy. Rather, it would be an occasion of great sadness, even utter hopelessness. For an absent Christ is no better than a dead Christ. Everything Jesus did, from His perfect life for us, His sufferings, death, and resurrection for us, would be meaningless if He were to abandon us...because you and I receive the benefits of what He did not by merely knowing about it, but by our living Lord coming to us and giving us those benefits in His Word and Sacraments.

We do not abide in a dead Christ, or an absent Christ, but in a living Savior who is here with us and for us. Your baptism is not a ritual done for God—it is where the living Christ joins you to Himself, giving you the life that flows from His holy wounds. The Lord's Supper is no mere memorial meal where we come up to the altar to remember that Jesus died for us. It is the place where Jesus intimately comes to us to refresh us with His living Body and Blood for us and for our salvation.

If Jesus had truly left us when He ascended into heaven, then His Sacraments would not be Means of Grace; then His Word would not be the Word of Life; then we would agree with those church members who attend church a couple of times a year—for we can remember Jesus as easily at home as we can sitting in a hard pew for an hour.

But rejoice! Jesus did not abandon us with His ascension. You cannot see the air around you, but it is there—otherwise you could not breathe. You cannot see Jesus, but He is here with us. He points us to His Word and Sacraments and promises: "I am with you always." In fact, He ascended into heaven so that He can truly be wherever His Word is purely preached and His Sacraments are rightly given. We don't come here week after week merely to recall what Jesus did. We come here because Christ is here—really and truly present, not just in Spirit, but in the flesh—with His flesh given for us and His blood shed for us. And His ascension made this possible. For He ascended to the right hand of the Father so that He can be with us always.

And this Ascended Lord is coming back—visibly. Now we live, not by sight, but by faith. We don't see Jesus with our eyes, we hear His Word of Life with our ears. But on Judgment Day our eyes will see Him. He will return in the same way that His disciples watched Him go. And I need to ask you: Are you looking forward to that Day, or are you frightened by it?

Let's hear what the Apostle John says about it in our Epistle: "In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the Day of Judgment...there is no

fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” (1 John 4:17-18)

And perhaps you’re thinking, “That doesn’t help me a whole lot, because John here speaks about perfect love, and I certainly know that I do not love perfectly. I don’t love God perfectly. I don’t love my neighbor perfectly. So how can I have confidence on the Day of Judgment? Because when Jesus comes back, He will see my lack of love for Him and for others.”

And here the Apostle John would say, “You’re right, and you’re wrong.” If you needed perfect love in order to have confidence on the Day of Judgment, then you’re right, you and I don’t have it. Just look at our lack of love for God. We don’t trust Him completely as He commands and invites us in His First Commandment. We don’t call on His Name rightly as He asks us to do. We don’t honor His Word and keep His Day sacred. Do we have perfect love for God? No. Nor do we have perfect love for our neighbor. We do not love our neighbor as we love our self. Compared to the way we love our self, we hate our neighbor. “Perfect love drives out fear,” says John. So should you and I be afraid of that Day when our Ascended Lord returns visibly?

Absolutely not! Because John is not speaking about our love, but Jesus’ love for us. Jesus’ love for you is perfect. And that’s why you can have confidence on the Day of Judgment. Jesus’ love for you took Him to the cross where He died for you. Jesus’ love for you is why He overcame death and the grave for you. Jesus’ love for you is why He gave you His life in your baptism. It’s why He who ascended keeps coming here to give you His body and blood, so that you “abide in Him and He in you.”

Jesus has perfect love, and that’s why He forgives your lack of love. He doesn’t punish you for breaking His Commandments—He forgives you. He doesn’t punish you for hating your neighbor—He forgives you. When your Ascended Lord returns on the Day of Judgment, you need have no fear whatsoever, but you can rejoice and look up—for you, too, shall ascend with Him. He will lift you up with Him to live forever in heaven, not because you love perfectly, but because He does. He loves you perfectly. Amen.