**The Ascension of Our Lord (observed)**

**May 24, 2020**

**Text—Acts 1:1-11**

According to dictionary.com, the word “escapism” is defined as follows: “the avoidance of reality by the absorption of the mind in entertainment or in an imaginative situation, activity, etc.” All of us, to some degree or another, indulge in escapist tendencies every now and then. Whenever we watch a movie, or play a video game, or read a novel, we are practicing escapism. Whenever we allow our thoughts to wander or daydream of pleasant situations, we are practicing escapism. Escapism often has a negative connotation to it: after all, nobody wants to be accused of “avoiding reality.” If you’re trying to avoid reality, that must mean that something is wrong with your real life, or maybe it means that your ability to cope with real life is deficient. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with watching a movie or reading a book, but if your entire life revolves around virtual or imaginary worlds, that might be indicative of a problem. Escapism in small doses is fine, but ultimately, we want to spend most of our time dealing with things that are tangible and real.

Whenever I read our first reading from Acts 1, the account of Jesus’ ascension into heaven, I often think that, for the briefest of moments, the disciples were practicing an unhealthy escapism as they watched Jesus ascend. This event happened forty days after Jesus rose from the dead on Easter, and during those days he had appeared to the disciples multiple times and showed that he had risen indeed. Now they were all gathered just outside Jerusalem in Bethany, and the disciples must have been able to tell that something major was about to happen. So they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” They wanted to know if they had finally arrived at the point when Jesus would take his place as the rightful king of the Jews. They thought that maybe it was time for him to overthrow Herod, drive out the Romans, and restore the dignity of the priesthood and temple. Perhaps they even thought that it was time for Jesus to make his power manifest over the entire world and assume rulership over the creation. But whatever they were hoping Jesus was going to do, this was not the time that he would do it. He told them that it was not for them to know when he would take his place as king. Instead of asking about that, they needed to be patient and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, and then serve as his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth. And after Jesus said these things, he began to rise into the air up toward heaven. A cloud eventually overtook him, and then he vanished from their sight.

For a little while after that, the disciples kept looking up where Jesus had risen, trying in vain to catch another glimpse of him and see where he had gone. They continued to stare into heaven even after Jesus had disappeared. Nobody really knows what they were thinking as they were looking. But I’m pretty sure that at least some of them were indulging in some escapist fantasies. Something like this: “Boy, wouldn’t it be amazing if we could go up with Jesus to heaven? I bet things are pretty cool up there.” Or maybe this: “I’m so disappointed that Jesus is leaving us! I thought this was going to be when he took his rightful place as king. That sure would have been great!” Whatever the disciples were thinking, they clearly weren’t paying attention to what was going on around them. So two men in white robes showed up, and asked them, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” In other words, they basically told the disciples to stop daydreaming. At the appointed time, Jesus would be coming back the same way he left. But for now, they needed to do what he had told them to: be his witnesses and proclaim his name to Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And of course, that’s exactly what they ended up doing. Ten days after Jesus’ ascension, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon them in tongues of fire, just as Jesus had promised. They spoke in tongues and attracted a crowd, and Peter preached to them about Jesus’ death, resurrection, and imminent return for judgment. Three thousand people became believers and were baptized that day. But it didn’t stop there: the apostles continued to preach in Jerusalem, and then went on journeys all throughout the Roman Empire to proclaim the Gospel everywhere. Thousands upon thousands of people became Christians, and it was all because the apostles listened to what the angels had said after Jesus ascended. “Why do you stand looking into heaven?” Why do you have your mind set on otherworldly things? Why are you trying to escape the reality that Jesus has put before you? Let God worry about heaven; you worry about this world and the task that Jesus has given you. This is no time for escapist fantasies: this is time for you to remain grounded in reality and serve as Jesus’ witnesses to the world.

How often are we tempted to indulge in escapist fantasies rather than face the reality that God has given us? How often do we wish for a bigger house, a better job, or a more loving spouse? How often have we buried ourselves in TV, video games, or substance abuse to distract ourselves from the things about our lives that we don’t like? How often have we, during this pandemic, done nothing but look forward to when it will be over, or look back and reminisce about the days before this all happened? How often have we, like the disciples, looked up into heaven where Jesus is and wished we could skip all of the hardships of this world and just be up there with him now? Life in this world can be very difficult, and it’s easy for us to want to escape it sometimes. The disciples certainly didn’t want to be where they were at that time: they wanted to go up to heaven with Jesus, or they wanted him to stay and inaugurate his kingdom on earth. They didn’t want to be without Jesus, and they didn’t want to just sit in Jerusalem waiting for the Holy Spirit. But that was the task that Jesus had given them, and it was the task they needed to undertake. As much as they might have wanted to be somewhere else in a different situation, what they needed to do was let go of their fantasies and focus on the reality that God had given them.

And the same goes for us as well. We are called to focus not on dreaming of heaven or of a time when things might be better, but rather on accomplishing the tasks that Jesus has given us in this world. We are called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are called to live out our various vocations as spouses, parents, children, workers, students, citizens, and friends. And most importantly of all, we are called to do exactly what the original disciples were supposed to do: confess the name of Jesus to the world and be witnesses to the riches of his grace. We are called to tell others about the death and resurrection of the Son of God, and the forgiveness of sins and eternal life they will receive by trusting in him. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he would have brought all of his people with him right then if he had intended for them to escape from this world. But he didn’t: he gave his church a commission instead, important work to do until his return. Our minds should only be set on heavenly things in the sense that we are to constantly think about our Lord, His promises to us, and the tasks he has commanded us to undertake. Otherwise, our focus belongs squarely on this world: on loving our neighbor, on caring for God’s creation, on sharing Christ’s love with those who do not know him. The time to think about heaven will come, but it is not here yet. For now, we will stop looking up into heaven as the disciples did; we will stop yearning for something better than we have and focus on the blessings and tasks that God has given us now. Our work here may be difficult at times, but like the original disciples, we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, who will give us the strength to accomplish our tasks until Jesus returns.

And return he will. On the last day, as the angels said, he will come back to earth in the same way that the disciples saw him leave. He will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. He will raise his people from the dead and gather all of humanity for judgment. Those who have trusted in him he will judge worthy, and then we will all take our place at his side, ruling over his creation for all eternity. And that is another reason why it’s important for us not to be looking into heaven all the time: because this world here will continue to matter even after Jesus returns. He will not utterly destroy everything here; rather, he will renew it and make it perfect, just as he will do with our bodies. He will redeem the entire creation, rather than helping us escape from it up into heaven. This world that we live in now will be made new at the appointed time, so there is hope for all of us who are yearning for something better. That hope is not that we would be taken out of this world, but that Jesus will purge it of everything sinful, harmful, and evil. And he works through everything that we do as Christians to begin accomplishing this task, which he will complete in all of its fullness on the last day. We don’t want to escape this world; we want to participate with Jesus in fixing it! And what better way to do that than to love God, love our neighbor, and share Christ’s love with all people we meet.

So don’t try to avoid the reality that God has placed you in; instead, embrace it and seek to make it better. An attitude of escapism is not proper for a Christian. Jesus did not ascend into heaven to make us think constantly about how nice it would be to be to leave this earth and go there with him. He does not call us to bemoan the flaws of life on this earth or indulge in escapist fantasies. Rather, he has told us to focus on this world and given us work to do here in preparation for his return. The church has been doing this work for two thousand years now, and it will continue to do so until the last day. We have the privilege of participating in the mission of Christ’s church, the same mission he gave to his disciples before his ascension. Fulfill this calling with eagerness and gladness, proclaim the name of Jesus to the world, and when he returns the same way he left, he will give you all of the blessings of his eternal kingdom. Amen.