

“Not the End, but Only the Beginning”

Luke 24:44-53

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Superhero movies are all the rage these days. They dominate the box office and continue to draw more and more people in as the years go by. One of the fun little quirks about these films is how they end the movie after the credits. It's usually some graphic flashing across the screen that says something along the lines of “such and such superhero will return.” The movie is concluded, and the hero has done his work. But the end of this movie is just the beginning of another that is yet to come. There is more work to be done, but it will be done in a different manner and in the context of a new storyline.

In our ascension text this morning, Jesus blesses His disciples as He ascends into heaven, leaving them behind as He goes to the right hand of His Father to rule. His work on earth is complete, at least as far as they can see and hear Him in His flesh. But the story of Jesus does not end with His ascension. He is not gone and simply awaiting the debut of His next storyline. The disciples knew this to be true. That is why they worshiped Him and returned home with great joy. Jesus' story continues, even after His ascension. He opens their minds to the Scriptures that all would be revealed to them, and He promises them the Holy Spirit from the Father above. These men can see that Jesus has left them a great promise—the promise that this is not the end, but only the beginning.

So many in the world are lost in the false idea of agnosticism—the idea that there is a god, but we can't possibly know who or what that god is. The idea of divine revelation is completely lost on them. They wander through this life hoping that this divine being will look favorably upon them, but at the same time not caring if they do, because who knows what comes after this life anyway. These worldly conclusions that people come to result from the improper use of their reason. They've allowed what their human reason can comprehend to supersede that which has been revealed to us by the one true God. Paul refutes this agnostic mentality very clearly in the opening chapter of Romans, where he says in verse 20, “For His invisible attributes, namely His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.”

All of us are susceptible to this tempting use of reason. The devil loves to stir up doubt within the people of God, to make you think that somehow, maybe what the Lord told us is wrong. That's exactly what the serpent did to the woman in the garden when he

said to her, “Did God actually say...” The Lord Jesus has opened our minds to the truth of Holy Scripture, just as He did to the Apostles in our text, but our sinful flesh simply cannot and will not tolerate that revelation. It wants us to question everything that God has told us, because, as an agent of Satan, it wants us to look to ourselves for knowledge. It wants us to rely on it for everything, to completely submit ourselves to its worldly ideas. That is the crux of what we deal with in this life. The Lord has revealed the truth to us, and we must cling to that truth through faith, lest we fall into sin and die separated from Christ.

Satan is working in the things of this world at every turn to pull God’s people as far as possible away from the truth of His Word. He does this by working through those around us in our vocations in the world, and all the more it seems, by corrupting the church where the Word should be found in its truth and purity. The church is being led astray by false teachers who cling to their reason and their feelings above all else. The truth of God’s Word is secondary to their “personal revelations” and their “prophecies.” The evil one draws them in with the promise of money and fame, and all they have to do is listen to him when he says to them, “Did God actually say...” And they have no means by which to battle the attacks of the devil because they have abandoned the truth of God’s Word which is their weapon. The writer to the Hebrews illuminates that for us in 4:12, “For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword...” These men must give an account for their abandonment of the Word and the souls which they led astray.

Again, the writer to the Hebrews makes that plain in 13:17, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” The opposite is also true. When your leader is going astray, it is incumbent upon you to call him to account for his error using the Word of God as the basis. In our text, the Apostles have the truth of Scripture opened to them, and they can clearly see and judge that everything that Jesus has taught them is in accord with Holy Scripture. Everything in their ministry with Jesus has fulfilled “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms.” By the Word of God, you have the necessary means to discern the false teachers that abound in the modern church today. Mark and avoid them, lest you be subject to the same destruction they bring upon themselves, as Peter says in his second epistle.

And as we all approach our own glorious end, we must cling all the more to that revealed truth. We are not lost like those who believe they cannot know what comes in the end, and we know the truth of God’s Word and can avoid the false teachers being used by Satan. As those who have been given faith by the Holy Spirit, we have the truth

of what is to come, and what is to come is not the end, but only the beginning. It is the beginning of eternity with the one who loves us so much that He gave His only begotten Son to suffer and die so that we don't have to die the death of an unbeliever. For forty days, Jesus taught the eleven all that they needed to proclaim the truth of His death and resurrection. They were given the revealed knowledge of the truth that we are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, and that is a truth that does not disappear when Jesus ascends into the clouds.

He has left us the means of grace to sustain us in this life, so that we would reach the end strengthened in our faith unto the day of salvation. The declaration of justification which has been decreed upon us is final, because it is not given to us based upon our own merit. We are declared righteous for the sake of Jesus Christ alone. It is only by His blood that we receive the mercy of our Heavenly Father, and it is only by His grace that we have the hope of eternal life. And so we avail ourselves at every opportunity of the gracious means by which He delivers the forgiveness which has been won on our behalf. We eat His body, and drink His blood to give us the concrete hope of salvation. It is ours, and we have it because of what Jesus did to obtain it for us and then freely give us.

Jesus is not gone, or hidden behind some veil which prevents us from knowing who our God is. Our God is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty." Those words from Exodus 34 refute any and all ideas that we cannot know who God is. He has revealed it to us in His Word, and as John teaches us in His Gospel, that Word is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We are not among the guilty, because we have been claimed as God's own children for the sake of Jesus. He is present among us to bring us His forgiveness every time we hear His Word, eat His Supper, and drown the Old Adam in the water of our baptisms. And His departure as He ascends in Bethany is not some devastating end to a great thing, but the beginning of something new—the beginning of His rule as He is enthroned in heaven. And by that rule He sustains us with His presence.

Despite the worldly assumptions that drive people to believe that He is gone, Jesus is still present here with us in Word and Sacrament. And not just in our hearts, or spiritually present, but really and truly here for the forgiveness of our sins. He comes to us physically by bringing us His risen and ascended body and blood in His Holy Supper. He makes Himself known to us in the power of the Holy Spirit by the preaching of His Word and in the remembrance of our Holy Baptisms. There, concretely, we see that His end on this earth was only the beginning. When He ascended into heaven to sit at the

right hand of the Father, He did so for you. The One who is divine and human rules all things for the benefit of His people, that we would share in His rule when we are called home at the day of judgment.

By His ascension, we know that we too will ascend on high to be with Him forever, to join with all the saints in the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom which shall have no end. And until that time, we have Him still, present with us in the Word and His Sacraments, to bring us the forgiveness of sins which sustains us until the day of salvation. The Apostles knew that, which is why they parted from Him with such great joy. As those who walk in the faith which is brought to us by the Holy Spirit and sustained in those means of grace, we know that when we are called home, it is not the end, but only the beginning. An eternal inheritance awaits us by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who ascended to the right hand of God to bring us safely to His Father's house, that we might be His eternal companions in our heavenly home. Amen.