

**Celebration of the Ascension of Our Lord**  
**ELW Service of the Word**  
**Sunday, May 24, 2020**  
**Gospel: Luke 24:44-53**

**Sermon by Bishop Steven L. Ullestad**

I have been inspired by what I have seen taking place in our congregations as they continue to find new ways to tell the old, old story. In fact we were so impressed we dedicated an entire Northeastern Iowa Synod Star to highlight and feature some of those things that are taking place in our parishes, whether it's daily devotions or electronic round-robins, it's just inspiring to see how our people, our leaders, our pastors and deacons, our worship leaders and musicians have decided not to be defeated by the pandemic, but to rather be creative.

I also mentioned that it is a whole lot more work than just simply writing a sermon and proclaiming it. Two different pastors have told me that they get everything done, they get the sermon done, they get their worship outlined and then they take 6 hours on the video machine making the IT stuff work. So, thanks for all the extra efforts that our roster has gone to. I also want to thank the members of this Synod who have decided that their commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ is more important than their convenience, and so they have continued to give generously to support that mission, and we are carefully stewarding those dollars. Thank you for that witness. That, too, is inspiring.

We are featuring the Ascension in this service today. It's a festival of the Church that was really one of the highest festivals for centuries. Now it's kind of forgotten because it falls in the middle of the week, and all those kinds of things. But it also is something that I had to learn quite a bit about, because what I had thought the Ascension was about turns out that that's not quite the way we as Lutherans look at it. There's a beautiful stained-glass window at St. Peter in Greene featuring the Ascension. And it's biblical, it tells the story that our readings today told. It also makes it look like it's the "Great Escape," and that is what I believed.

I went to seminary and learned a new word or two. One of them was ubiquitous. So, now when you go to seminary, you'll already have one of those seminary words. Ubiquitous, or the ubiquity of God, means that God is everywhere at all times. You can't kick God out of your life. God is present. And that concept evolves from what we understand in the Lutheran church to be the Ascension. It's not the "Great Escape." It's the "Great Entrance" into all of creation.

And this gives us a talking point, shall we say, with the Reformed tradition, including the Presbyterians. The Presbyterians want to make sure that the sovereignty of Jesus Christ is sacred, that he ascends into heaven, and literally sits at the right hand of God where he is Lord of all creation. Lutherans talk about how the Ascension of Jesus is about how he enters into all of creation. It's the "Great Entrance." It's the place of the ubiquity of God. And so, the Lordship of Jesus is expressed in his presence in all of creation.

We even include that concept in our Ordination rite where we talk about how Jesus ascends, and the previous translation was "filling all of creation," and now we say, "He ascended into heaven where Christ pours out his gifts abundantly on the church." Same concept. The Ascension is not a way of escaping Earth. It is a way of entering into all of creation. Some folks get this. But it does make for lively debates among the

various denominations. It's just one more example of the Bible clearly says something, and then we interpret it. And various interpretations lead us to various denominations.

But Martin Luther understood it. He said that, "God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars." That's the ubiquity of God. That's how the gospel is proclaimed in all of creation, because Jesus now fills all of creation.

One of my favorite songwriters, hymn writers, is Nikolai Grundtvig. He's probably most famous for *O Day Full of Grace*. But the Grundtvigs—the people who followed his teaching—found themselves in conflict with some other folks within the church. Grundtvig believed that there is a "living Word" and a "dead Word." And the "living Word" is that which is proclaimed and taught. And the "dead Word" is anything that's in writing—including the Bible. Well, you can see where that would lead to conflict in the church. And it eventually broke off into other branches of Lutheranism.

But Grundtvig had this figured out—that somehow God is in all things. This was not a song by Grundtvig, but it's one of my favorite Danish songs. It gives an example of a kind of a fun, light-hearted interpretation of Grundtvig's theology about the importance of creation and God's presence in creation. The first verse is this:

Hustle up, you lazy good-for-nothing sofa lover, dust the cobwebs from your soul.  
Join our happy song as we stride along through the forests and the fields our goal.  
Take your leave from books, our dusty-musty friends and tyrants and declare your liberty.  
Books may be ok for another day but today we will be gay and free!

Chorus:

Blue skies are calling, gentle winds are blowing. Kind Mother Nature heals the pain and ends decay. Where flowers bloom and quiet streams are flowing we find the strength to meet the tasks of today!

If you need to be more aware of the presence of God you go for a hike. That was a part of this whole philosophy or understanding of the presence of God in all of creation. I mentioned *O Day Full of Grace*. There are alternative verses printed in our hymnal, our worship book. And here are a couple to again make the point:

3. Yea, were ev'ry tree endowed with speech,  
and were ev'ry leaflet singing,  
they never with praise God's worth could reach,  
though earth with their praise were ringing.  
Who fully could praise the Light of life  
who light to our souls is bringing?

4. As birds in the morning sing their praise,  
God's fatherly love we cherish,  
for giving to us this day of grace,  
for life that shall never perish.  
The church God has kept two thousand years,  
and hungering souls did nourish.

Again, an appreciation for the presence of God with us—the singing of the birds, or the trees endowed with speech. This is the ubiquity of God.

Well, I think I've been watching a little bit too much news, and it would be easy to believe that God's not the only thing that's ubiquitous, but rather the coronavirus is as well. And it is extraordinarily serious, it is present everywhere. Steve [Brackett] and I are practicing social distancing. We wear masks into the office. It is real. It's dangerous. And it's going to be with us for a while. But we can block it. We can care for how we relate to other people. We can wear our masks. We can make sure that there's distance that makes us safer. We can only go out for things that are essential, and not make quick trips all over to run errands. The virus, as all-consuming as it is—and it is very serious—does not match the ubiquity of God. You can't block God's presence. You can't kick God out of a school or culture or any building. You can't even kick him out of your life. Once God has decided to be your God, that will be the way it is your whole life. That is what it means for Jesus to ascend and fill all of creation.

I again am grateful for everything that our members, our leaders are doing to maintain a healthy witness and a safe witness. We can't stress this enough, that when the time comes for us to gather again in worship in person-to-person worship we will do that safely. It's not now, but it is coming. And when we gather, whether it's electronically through websites or Facebook pages, or when we're back face-to-face, person-to-person God is present because Jesus has ascended and has filled all of creation. Amen