

**Celebration of the Ascension of Our Lord**  
**ELW Service of the Word**  
**Sunday, May 24, 2020**

**Introduction to the day**

In today's readings the risen Christ ascends into heaven and his followers are assured that the Spirit will empower them to be witnesses throughout the earth. The disciples were told to not gaze up into heaven to look for Jesus (Acts 1:11); we find his presence among us as we proclaim the word and share the Easter feast. We, too, long for the Spirit to enliven our faith and invigorate our mission.

**INVOCATION**

Though physically separated from one another, we gather together for worship in the name of the Triune God, + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**Amen**

**THANKSGIVING FOR BAPTISM**

Baptism is a gift from God to us. This gift is so precious and generous that we invite people of all ages to be washed by the love of God and sealed with the Holy Spirit. Baptism brings us into the family of God and makes us members of the Body of Christ.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

**Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

Joined to Christ in the waters of baptism,  
we are raised with him to new life.  
Let us give thanks for the gift of baptism.

Holy God, holy and merciful, holy and mighty, you are the river of life, you are the everlasting wellspring, you are the fire of rebirth.

Glory to you for oceans and lakes, for rivers and streams. Honor to you for cloud and rain, for dew and snow. Your waters are below us, around us, above us: our life is born in you. You are the fountain of resurrection.

Praise to you for your saving waters: Noah and the animals survive the flood, Hagar discovers your well. The Israelites escape through the sea, and they drink from your gushing rock. Naaman washes his leprosy away, and the Samaritan woman will never be thirsty again.

At this font, holy God, we pray: Praise to you for the water of baptism and for your Word that saves us in this water. Breathe your Spirit into all who are gathered here and into all creation. Illumine our days. Enliven our bones. Dry our tears. Wash away the sin within us, and drown the evil around us.

Satisfy all our thirst with your living water, Jesus Christ, our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Amen.**

**GATHERING SONG *Dearest Jesus, at Your Word* ELW #520**

**GREETING (ELW p. 213)**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

**And also with you.**

**HYMN OF PRAISE *Praise to You, O God of Mercy* ELW #208**

**PRAYER OF THE DAY (ELW p. 215)**

Let us pray.

Almighty God, your only Son was taken into the heavens and in your presence intercedes for us. Receive us and our prayers for all the world, and in the end bring everything into your glory, through Jesus Christ, our Sovereign and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Amen.**

**FIRST READING: Acts 1:1-11**

A reading from Acts.

*Before he is lifted into heaven, Jesus promises that the missionary work of the disciples will spread out from Jerusalem to all the world. His words provide an outline of the book of Acts.*

[Luke writes:] <sup>1</sup>In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning <sup>2</sup>until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup>While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; <sup>5</sup>for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

<sup>6</sup>So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup>He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." <sup>9</sup>When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup>While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup>They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

The word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

**PSALM: Psalm 47**

<sup>1</sup>Clap your hands, | all you peoples;  
shout to God with a | joyful sound.

<sup>2</sup>**For the LORD Most High is | to be feared:**  
**a great king over | all the earth,**

<sup>3</sup>who subdues the | peoples under us,

and the nations un- | der our feet;  
¶ **who chooses our inheri- | tance for us,  
the pride of Jacob, | whom God loves. R**  
¶ God has gone up | with a shout,  
the LORD with the sound | of the ram's horn.  
¶ **Sing praises to | God, sing praises;  
sing praises to our | king, sing praises. R**  
¶ For God is king of | all the earth;  
sing praises | with a song.  
¶ **God reigns o- | ver the nations;  
God is en- | throned on high.**

¶ The nobles of the peoples have gathered as the people of the | God of Abraham.  
The rulers of the earth belong to God, who is high- | ly exalted. **R**

## **SECOND READING: Ephesians 1:15-23**

A reading from Ephesians.

*The risen and exalted Christ reigns over the entire universe. The author of Ephesians prays that we are given the wisdom to know the power of the risen Christ and the empowering hope that the knowledge of this inheritance provides.*

<sup>15</sup>I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason <sup>16</sup>I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. <sup>17</sup>I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, <sup>18</sup>so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, <sup>19</sup>and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. <sup>20</sup>God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup>far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. <sup>22</sup>And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, <sup>23</sup>which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

The word of the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**

## **CHILDREN'S MESSAGE**

### **GOSPEL ACCLAMATION (ELW p. 151)**

#### **GOSPEL: Luke 24:44-53**

The holy gospel according to Luke.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

*On the day of his ascension, Jesus leaves his disciples with a commission, a blessing, and a promise of the Holy Spirit.*

<sup>44</sup>[Jesus said to the eleven and those with them,] “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the

psalms must be fulfilled.”<sup>45</sup>Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup>and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup>and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup>You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup>And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

<sup>50</sup>Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. <sup>51</sup>While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. <sup>52</sup>And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; <sup>53</sup>and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

The gospel of the Lord.  
**Praise to you, O Christ.**

## **SERMON – 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 the 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 that 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—he 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 and 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 face-to-face, 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

## **HYMN OF THE DAY *O Day Full of Grace* ELW #627**

### **NICENE CREED**

**We believe in one God,  
    the Father, the Almighty,  
    maker of heaven and earth,  
    of all that is, seen and unseen.**  
**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
    the only Son of God,  
    eternally begotten of the Father,  
    God from God, Light from Light,**

true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation

he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary  
and became truly human.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,\*  
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

## PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Uplifted by the promised hope of healing and resurrection, we join the people of God in all times and places in praying for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

*A brief silence.*

Living God, you chose us to be your witnesses in the world. We pray for the church in every place and the congregations in our synod. Focus our hearts and minds on the ministry we share in your name. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

Loving God, all creation sings praise to you. You delight in the oceans, and the mountains are your throne. Teach us humility and respect for our home. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

Sovereign God, you rule the heavens, the earth, and time itself. Make this a time of justice, peace, and solidarity among all nations and peoples, so that oppression and violence rule no more. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

Tender God, we wait with hope for your presence to heal us, bless us, restore us, and give us peace. You know all the names of those who are sick and suffering. We pray this day for all those who have been affected in any way by Covid-19. We pray for the safety of healthcare workers and first responders. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

Gentle God, you guide us as we seek wisdom. We pray for teachers, professors, theologians, day care workers, and all those charged with teaching the young and old. Give them endurance and persistence in their valuable work. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

Saving God, we give you thanks for all those who have worked to bring your Gospel of hope and healing to people's homes during this time of social distancing: pastors, deacons, worship assistants, worship planners, musicians, and technology specialists. We look with anticipation to the time when we will once again be able to gather in person in our sanctuaries. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

Infinite God, your inheritance given to all your saints is your presence in our life and in our death. We remember with thanksgiving the faithful departed, especially Nicolaus Copernicus and Lenhard Euler, scientists, whom we commemorate today, and all those we have lost and have been unable to properly honor during this time of social distancing. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

With bold confidence in your love, almighty God, we place all for whom we pray into your eternal care; through Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

#### **PEACE (ELW p. 217)**

The peace of Christ be with you always.

**And also with you.**

#### **OFFERING (ELW p. 217)**

Please be generous in your support of the congregations of our synod and the various organizations helping those most affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

#### **THANKSGIVING FOR THE WORD ELW p. 220**

Let us pray.

Praise and thanks to you, holy God, for by your Word you made all things: you spoke light into darkness, called forth beauty from chaos, and brought life into being. For your Word of life, O God,

**we give you thanks and praise.**

By your Word you called your people Israel to tell of your wonderful gifts: freedom from captivity, water on the desert journey, a pathway home from exile, wisdom for life with you. For your Word of life, O God,

**we give you thanks and praise.**

Through Jesus, your Word made flesh, you speak to us and call us to witness: forgiveness through the cross, life to those entombed by death, the way of your self-giving love. For your Word of life, O God,

**we give you thanks and praise.**

Send your Spirit of truth, O God; rekindle your gifts within us: renew our faith, increase our hope, and deepen our love, for the sake of a world in need. Faithful to your Word, O God, draw near to all who call on you; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory forever.

**Amen.**

## **LORD'S PRAYER (ELW p. 221)**

Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray.

**Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those  
who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power, and the glory,  
forever and ever. Amen.**

## **BLESSING ELW p. 221**

The God of steadfastness and encouragement  
grant you to live in harmony with one another,  
in accordance with Christ Jesus.

**Amen.**

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,  
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen.**

The God of all grace ✝ bless you now and forever.

**Amen.**

## **SENDING SONG *A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing!* ELW #393**

## **DISMISSAL ELW p. 222**

Go forth into the world to serve God with gladness; be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honor all people; love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Thanks be to God.**

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