

# **Sermon on Ephesians 1:15-23: The Ascended Christ Will Preserve His Church**

## **The Ascension of Our Lord**

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### **Preface**

Like the other ministerial education schools of our synod, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was asked by the administrator of the CCFS to observe the “Walking Together” emphasis which congregations were encouraged to observe on May 1, 2005. The Ascension sermon that follows was part of this observance.

As it discussed worship plans for the week, the faculty expressed its deep concern over the severe cutbacks in ministry brought about by the synod’s financial difficulties. Sensing that the synod is experiencing more than a cyclical downturn in revenue, the faculty accepted a recommendation to observe the “Walking Together” event in a week of humiliation and prayer. Such an emphasis, the faculty felt, would not only allow faculty members and students to assess their own attitudes and confess their own sins, but also would present a model to pastoral students for dealing with crises in a Christian congregation. In congregations as well as in an assembly of congregations, financial problems have internal as well as external causes. They are a result not only of external causes like recessions and interest rates but of internal causes like sin, greed, and pride.

Worship for the week followed the schedule already in place. With the help of a faculty advisor, Junior students conducted the services on four of the five days; Professor James Tiefel had been appointed months before as the preacher for the Ascension festival. As usual, the Gospel for the Sunday established the theme for the week. The Gospel for Easter 6 records Jesus' words to his disciples in the upper room: “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” Joel Schwartz correctly noted that the Savior's command in this passage is really his commission to proclaim the gospel, and then reviewed the Savior's promise that he and his Spirit would encourage and empower proclaimers until the end of the age.

On Tuesday, Timothy Shrimpton introduced a lesson from Haggai 1:1-11. In clear and strong words the preacher applied the prophet's words to worshipers: the Lord removes his blessing from those who fail to make his work a priority in their lives. Prompted by the Lord’s command in the lesson, “Give careful thought to your ways,” the seminary family participated in a Rite for Personal Examination, a portion of which is adduced here:

P: As we think of the troubled times in which we live, are there other sins we may have committed and which we ought to confess?

C: I should remember those sins that do not always seem like sins but surely offend God and deserve his anger. Have I ...

Neglected to pray for the leaders of my synod that God might grant wisdom in difficult times?

Criticized others for decisions they’ve made without knowing their circumstances?

Complained about the direction of the synod without seeking to change the direction of my own heart?

Have I ...

Anticipated the public ministry as though it were my right rather than a gift from God?

Put aside my daily studies with the thought that I had done enough for God and the Church?

Let my thoughts be more focused on a brother’s style than on the substance his message for me?

Have I ...

Led others, by my words or actions, to disrespect the schools and the system that trained me?

Caused others to stumble in faith while I insisted on using my Christian liberty?

Looked down on those who lack the training the Lord was pleased to bestow on me as a gift?

Have I ...

Become a victim of materialism and allowed niceties to overshadow necessities as my priorities?  
Supposed that giving myself to the Lord releases me from the responsibility to be a steward of all God's blessings?

Overlooked opportunities I have to share the gospel through my regular and cheerful offerings?

Have I ...

Failed to be a brother to my brothers?

Failed to teach with my example and lifestyle as well as with my words?

Failed to learn with eagerness and joy?

Purposefully, there was neither an absolution nor a blessing at chapel on Tuesday. Worshipers were encouraged to ponder and reflect on their own sins and errors as the day and night progressed. On Wednesday, Jesse Stern read selected passages from Joel 1 and 2 and repeated the prophet's urging to view catastrophes as a message from God and a call to repentance. He led the student body and faculty in the rite for Corporate Confession and Absolution (*Christian Worship Occasional Services*, page 29. The rubric attached to this rite suggests its use for "times of national emergency, in time of difficulty in a congregation when factions threaten to divert a congregation from its purpose.").

The sermon based on Ephesians 1:16-23 was part of the Ascension observance on Thursday, May 5. The Sacrament of the Altar was also celebrated in this festival service. In Word and Meal the Savior proclaimed his rich promises of pardon and power.

Friday's service focused on the angels' words to the disciples in the last verse of the Acts 1 Ascension account: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." Aaron Strong made the obvious application: We look to Jesus with longing and love, but Jesus has work for us to do. We have, examined our lives and hearts, we have confessed our sins, we have heard the Savior's forgiveness. Now we go into the world and proclaim the Savior's love until he returns.

We pray—and we have confidence it will be so—that our chapel emphasis on humiliation and prayer, examination and confession, law and gospel during the synod's "Walking Together" week will bear fruit in the hearts and lives of those who worship together as the seminary family. We observe that such an emphasis also might bear fruit in the lives of brothers and sisters throughout the WELS.

*Ephesians 1:15-23 For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*

### **Introduction:**

How do you fix an ailing church? That seems to be the challenge that's facing us these days. Of course, some people aren't convinced the church is ailing and some people don't know the church is ailing, but the

church is ailing. “If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck”—well, you know what I mean; the symptoms are pretty obvious.

So how do you fix an ailing church? You close the prep schools. You scuttle the Board for Parish Services. You suspend the synod bylaws so you can downsize. In other words, you spend less. You get the pastors to teach stewardship, you get the people to open their wallets, and you go visit the rich people. In other words, you take in more. You change the church for the future or you return the church to the past, you involve the lay people more or you involve the lay people less, you revitalize the Midwest or you reach out to North America. In other words, you do something different. Everybody has a solution for what ails the church. You don’t know whether to laugh or cry or just to yawn.

So how do you fix an ailing church? To tell you the truth, I think I’ve suggested most of those solutions at one time or another. I don’t have the answer. But I believe St. Paul does. When he wrote the first chapter of his letter to the Ephesians he outlined a plan that can help ailing congregations and church bodies get better. His plan doesn’t have anything to do with budgets or strategies or programs. Actually, Paul’s solution doesn’t have anything to do with what people do at all. Paul’s solution has to do with what Christ does. And Paul’s solution isn’t really a plan. It’s a promise. On this festival day, let’s turn to Paul—which is the same thing as turning to God—and hear the promise that will fix an ailing church:

### **The Ascended Christ Will Preserve His Church**

- I. With his own power**
- II. Through his own people**

#### **With his own power**

From what we read, the congregation in Ephesus wasn’t an ailing church. There’s nothing here like what Paul wrote to the Corinthians. Paul knew these people, or at least he remembered a lot of them. Half a decade before he wrote this letter he had spent over two years in Ephesus. He had heard about their *faith in the Lord Jesus* and their *love for all the saints*, but he had also seen it.

But Paul certainly understood that those healthy Ephesian smiles probably masked some real fears about the future. The people in Ephesus knew Paul was in prison, and they knew the Roman government didn’t have much patience with zealots from Palestine. Aquila and Priscilla lived in Ephesus, and they got there because Claudius had kicked the Jews out of Rome. Everybody who was in the city when Paul was there remembered the riot that Demetrius started. For first century Christians, living in the Mediterranean world was like 21st century Christians living in the Middle East—you never knew when the next bomb was going to go off.

There may not have been trouble in Ephesus, but there was trouble in Corinth and there was trouble in Thessalonica. Forty years wouldn’t pass before there would be trouble in Ephesus, too. John’s letter accuses the Ephesian congregation of forsaking its first love. Of the seven churches to which John wrote letters, five of them were experiencing bad problems. Christians were worried; who could blame them?

Did they have more to worry about than we do? I don’t know. Was the Roman threat or the Jewish threat worse than the threats Christians face today from Islam or Communism or AIDS in Africa? The Colossians were battling pop psychology, the Thessalonians were confused about the Second Coming, the Corinthians were bickering over worship, the Christians in Pergamum were dealing with immorality, and the Laodiceans were lethargic. What did they see then that we don’t see now? And so Christians in this age, just like Christians in that age, raise the question: Out of this mess, can Christ really preserve the church? Or are Christians on their way out?

You probably heard that John Mason is willing to take his runaway bride back again. You probably also know that the media thinks this is pretty funny—I saw a headline: “Run Away from Your Runaway Bride, John Mason.” Well, the truth is, the Lord Jesus has no intention of running away from his Bride, either. Jesus has a

lot invested in his Bride. He left his place in heaven for her, he kept the demands of God's law for her, he took her sins to the cross. "He loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." The blood of Jesus has forged a titanium bond between Christ and his church; you can't get the two apart. Paul says here that the church is Christ's body—you can't have the body without the head or the head without the body—the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. I'm not sure if the church is the fullness of Christ or Christ is the fullness of the church but it comes out the same. Christ and the church are inseparable.

So we're celebrating the Ascension this morning. Paul wrote an Ascension pericope here and that's why it's the Second Lesson for today: "God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet." This is how the Father stamped his approval on the work of his Son. This is how he signed the bloody credit card. He exalted his Son to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name. That's right. Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. He said it himself. You can't really describe this very well. It is what it is. But do you get this? Everything belongs to Christ. Everything: power, wealth, wisdom, strength, honor, glory, praise. You name it, he's got it. And if Christ and the church are inseparable, then everything that belongs to Christ belongs to the church. And that's exactly what Paul says: "God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church."

Are you afraid for the future of our ailing church? Are you afraid we'll have to close our prep schools and won't have enough pastors and teachers in our WELS future? Are you afraid the enrollment at MLC will drop so low and tuition will soar so high that students won't attend? Are you afraid they'll sell the seminary campus and turn these 80 acres into a rich subdivision called Seminary Heights? Are you afraid Christian Life Resources will end up with more money than WELS and buy out the other half of 2929? I'm being silly, but I'm being silly on purpose. Do you think there's not enough power at the right hand of God to save a blip like WELS? Now I'm serious. Are you afraid you might baptize a baby and it won't take? Are you afraid you may speak the absolution and it won't count? Are you afraid you may preach the gospel and it won't work, afraid you may offer the Sacrament and it won't forgive? Go and be Chicken Little and fear that the sky is falling down before you fear that Christ lacks the power to work through the gospel in Word and Sacrament. John Paul II told a billion Roman Catholics, "Do not be afraid," and they dropped to their knees in deceived relief. The Son of God tells us, "Fear not little flock" and we worry and wonder and weep for our ailing church. Listen: Christ *wants* to preserve the Church and Christ **WILL** preserve the Church because Christ *can* preserve the Church. And he'll do it with his own power.

### **Through his own people**

Then why did Paul pray? He wrote that he was thanking God for the Ephesians but he was really interceding for the Ephesians. If Christ wants to preserve the Church and he can preserve the Church and he will preserve the Church, what's there to pray about?

The one holy Christian and apostolic church is not a singular noun. It's an assembly of people, a communion of saints. But these are declared saints. They're *simul justus et peccator* saints. They're saints with a sinful nature. Paul saw trouble coming to the saints in Ephesus several years before he wrote this letter. On his way from Macedonia to Jerusalem, he stopped in Miletus and asked the elders of the church to come and see him. It wasn't a happy get-together. Already then Paul could see his own imprisonment and death. What did he see for Ephesus? "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples." There was plenty to pray about. And so Paul prayed; he prayed hard and he prayed often "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.”

There was a lot at stake here. There still is a lot at stake here. What happens when believers don't gain that faith perception of the words and works of Jesus? What if our hearts never find the wisdom that sees the spiritual truths behind the theological facts? What happens if we never sense the hope we have as children of God? What happens if we never come to value the riches we share right now with all the saints who live in heaven? What happens if we never experience the power that Christ has to give?

Aren't we empty then? Aren't we obligated to rely on ourselves then? A pestilence lies on the visible church when its members suppose they have to rely on themselves. They stand in the city. Look, here is the answer, they say. Look, there is the answer. Aha, here is the plan. No, no, this is the strategy. This will surely attract the lost and this will certainly regain the straying. At first we are cocksure and then we are never sure. When we burn ourselves out we see ourselves as paupers and softly weep into our silk handkerchiefs. Poor WELS.

Before Christ can work any good in us or use us in any way he needs to lead us to empty ourselves of ourselves. He needs to move us to examine our lives and he needs to compel us to confess the sins we find there. He needs to bring us low so we will look up to him. And when we look up to Christ what will we find there? We will find the good news there, that death is done and life is ours. And when we find that death is done and life is ours, the cross will become real and the empty tomb will become real. And in the reality of the cross and the empty tomb we will know “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” And our hope will become like bedrock and we'll know that our inheritance is stored in a Swiss bank. And we'll know the power and feel the power and be able to use the power “which is just like the working of God's mighty strength which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.” With that kind of power we'll be the mustard seed in God's garden. We'll be able to do all things through Christ who gives us strength. We'll carry the water and bring the bread and wine and herald the good news. And then, through his own people and with his own power, the ascended Christ will preserve his Church.

How do we fix an ailing church? We can't. We can only fix ourselves. And so we empty ourselves of pride and know-it-all-ism. We get rid of that little Arminian voice inside of us that says, “Me, too.” We confess our sins and drown our sinful nature every day. We recognize that the God who owes us nothing has given us everything. We lift our eyes to the ascended Christ. And then we get out of the way and let him take us over.

I don't want to give the wrong impression here. I'm not a Latinist and I struggled translating dogmatics slugs when I was a student. But long ago a pastor I loved shared with me a saying from Augustine that I've never forgotten, and I share it with you today. *In aeternum Christus regnabit in sanctis suis. Hoc Deus dixit. Hoc Deus promisit. Et si parum est, hoc Deus etiam iuravit.* Frame it in your mind, hang it on your heart, nail it to your ministry, view it to the day you die. In eternity Christ will rule among his saints. This God has said. This God has promised. And if that is too small, this God has also sworn. Believe that and Christ will preserve his Church with his power through you! Amen.