

Scripture: Acts 1:1-11

Heidelberg Catechism: Lord's Day 18

Message: Gone for Good

May 6, 2018; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON

Ascension Day theme

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Maybe you have seen the sign hanging on a wall or above a door somewhere. Perhaps you've seen it in someone's home or in their office: "Some people bless us in their coming and some people bless us in their going."

Is that what the sermon title means? Gone for good. Never to come back. Sometimes we are glad someone is gone for good. We've been waiting for this person to leave. They have been a nuisance or bother to us. Good riddance. We're glad they are gone. The "friend" we invited over was very bossy or talked nonstop. We got tired of being with them, but we couldn't very well send them away. But finally they left. Good riddance.

But more often it hurts when someone is gone for good. We're going to miss them after they move so far away. Or we miss someone who has died, gone to be with the Lord in heaven. They won't come back. They're gone for good.

Jesus is gone for good, too. But this is said with a twist of meaning. We don't say good riddance to Jesus as if it is a relief to get him out of the way. Nor do we say that Jesus is gone forever, for good, never to come back. Jesus is gone, but he is still with us. Jesus is gone, but he will come back someday.

Jesus gave a promise before he ascended. It is recorded by Matthew, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:20). Jesus says he will be with us always. There will never be a time when Jesus is not present. And yet he is gone. He ascended. How can that make sense?

It's because Jesus is God. Therefore he can be everywhere at once. It is the wonder of his greatness that we cannot fully understand. We must believe that Jesus is not limited by time and space like we are. He is with us always, even as our Saviour and Lord has ascended to heaven.

That is why it is important that we realize why it is good that Jesus has ascended. We come to see that Jesus is gone for good, gone for our good.

Our reading from the Heidelberg Catechism identifies three benefits of Jesus' ascension. The first is that he pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of his Father. We read that in Romans 8:34, "Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." That is also what we read in 1 John 2:1, "If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the

Righteous One."

Jesus is gone for good, for the good of having someone in the very presence of the Father speaking for us. Jesus came to this earth to be our Saviour. He was born of a virgin, he suffered under Pontius Pilate. He was crucified, died, and was buried. He also rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. Each one of those acts was necessary for our salvation. But Jesus' did not finish his work with his ascension. He did not brush the dust off his clothes and say, "Well, that's that." He continues his work on our behalf, interceding for us.

We have fellowship with our Father in heaven through Jesus. Jesus is in the Father's presence, not to add to the work of salvation, but to share the blessings of his victory. We are sure of continued fellowship because Jesus pleads our cause before the Father. We are sure of our eventual victory because Jesus is our defense in heaven. Jesus is in the very presence of God, speaking to the Father on our behalf, to assure us that someday we will be with him in glory. That's good. Jesus is gone for our good.

The second benefit which the Catechism mentions is that "we have our own flesh in heaven--a guarantee that Christ our head will take us, his members, to himself in heaven."

This is where things get a bit confusing. We have already said that Jesus is God and therefore he can be everywhere. Now we are saying that Jesus is human, just like us. Jesus, as God, became human. We celebrate the incarnation at Christmas: Jesus, as God, became like us in the flesh. And he is in heaven with that human nature. Our humanity is now in glory. He is one of us, and now he is in heaven. But he has a glorified body. The disciples saw it after the resurrection. Just as Jesus identified with us in his humiliation, his coming to earth, suffering, dying, so he will claim us in his exaltation, his resurrection and ascension. Jesus is in heaven as our leader, forerunner.

"I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:2-3).

We can believe this is true, because Jesus ascended. He is there for our good, so we can someday join him. Death is not victorious. Death is not the end. Jesus has ascended and will take us to heaven to be with him forever. That's good. Jesus is gone for our good.

The third benefit identifying that Jesus is gone for good is so that he could "send his Spirit to us on earth as a further guarantee."

"But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7).

Jesus is saying that unless he goes the way of the cross and then leaves this earth in his ascension, the Spirit would not come. Having completed the work of salvation on the cross

and rising from the dead, that work being accepted by the Father in Jesus' ascension, makes it possible for the Spirit to be sent to earth. Jesus teaches us, and we must believe it and experience it, that his comfort, his word, and his power are now more richly present in his followers than before his ascension, through the power of the Spirit.

The presence of the Spirit does at least two things for us. The Spirit is our Counselor or Comforter. The Spirit reassures us of the continuing presence of God the Father. "Not as orphans are we left in sorrow now." By his presence the Spirit enables us to know the truth (John 15:26, 16:13), to know the words of Jesus (John 14:26, 15:26), and to do the works of Jesus (John 14:12).

The Spirit is also a source of power for us. Jesus told his disciples that they would receive power when the Spirit came. The presence of the Spirit makes us able to do great things. He gives us courage. He gives us ability. We can challenge and defeat the enemy.

"By the Spirit's power we make the goal of our lives, not earthly things, but the things above where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand." That's good.

Jesus is gone for good. He is gone for our good. His ascension gives us tremendous benefits: he is interceding for us in the Father's presence, he is our guarantee that we will go to heaven, he has sent us his Spirit. We must do something with these benefits.

And so Jesus also gave us a command at his ascension. You must tell this good news to the ends of the earth..."repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in (the Christ's) name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." (Luke 24:47-48)

Go and make disciples. Be a salt in the earth. Be a light in the darkness of a sinful world. Serve Jesus everywhere without fitting in. Show the world that Jesus has made a difference. Yes, he ascended, but he still makes a difference in the world.

*We watched a video clip, "Ascension: The King Takes His Throne" from the Ray Vander Laan study, "The Mission of Jesus." Vander Laan emphasizes that Jesus took his place and King and is claiming every inch of his creation, sending his followers to make that claim in the authority of Jesus as Lord.*

Jesus is gone for good, for our good. He has ascended to heaven, but he is with us always, to the very end of the age. He is involved in our daily lives, even to the point of interceding for us before the Father. He has sent us his Spirit to reassure us of his presence and equip us for his service.

Trust in Jesus' presence. Serve in his ascension power.

Amen.