

The Feast for the Ascension of our Lord

Mark 16:14-20

Christ is arisen. Alleluia indeed. For Him having been raised from death is our eternal life. He was, as He has had His holy Apostle Paul write it, *given over into death for our trespasses and raised to life for our justification*, that is: to make us right with Himself and righteous before His judgement. He is also ascended into Heaven, and that, also, is our eternal life, for it is seated at the right hand of the Father in Heaven, as He is now, and also somehow simultaneously standing before Him as our heavenly High Priest, that He now justifies us and so saves us from eternal agony in Hell unto eternal life with Him in glory.

A joyful Truth it is, that He is ascended into Heaven, as we celebrate it tonight, and hear about it from the Word of God. And yet, what we hear tonight, it starts out on a somewhat sour note does it not? *When He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table, He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, we hear, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.*

This is rather typical of the Gospel according to Saint Mark, actually; it generally has a keen eye for the faults and flaws and failures of the faithful. Most likely this is meant to make it clear that the realities of God are exactly that, *realities*: the salvation of God is not a fairy tale, and we do not have to pretend to live in Fairyland to believe it. It is the Truth of God spoken into the real world as it really is, to real sinners as we really are, with real shortcomings and sins. And this means that you actually being a sinner, for real, and life not having quite worked out for you, it does not mean that the salvation of God is nothing to do with you and somehow does not apply to you. No, all that the Word of God has to say, it says to *you*, in real life, and in real time, and you can believe it without having to lie to yourself, and you really should, believe it, that is. And this is not really a bad thing, now, is it?

Well, it is right for us to be reminded that we are sinners, and that we live our life of faith in the real world rather than in a fairy tale land, also for the simple reason that it is true.

Therefore is it also, that when our Lord Jesus comes to His Christians, when we gather around the table, He does rebuke our unbelief and hardness of heart, that we do not believe His Word, that He lives and reigns for real, and our other sins and shortcomings.

This He does, not to make us miserable; well, there are times when we should feel miserable about our ungodly attitudes and our bad behaviour, so as to realise that we really need to work on ourselves and amend our ways. But mainly and mostly He rebukes us for our sins and shortcomings so that we may see our need for His salvation, and understand how great His goodness is, and rejoice in His salvation, and not come to despise Him and His salvation, as Satan would have us do, and seek something else instead, something more exciting or otherwise entertaining, and lose sight of His salvation and become again slaves to Satan and lost with him to the eternal fire. As we hear it tonight that our Lord Jesus says it: *He who does not believe will be condemned.*

So what we hear already at the outset of the account of the Ascension of our Lord into Heaven, it anticipates in the most excellent way the reality in which we live as His Church and His Christians after His Ascension into Heaven: That He Himself, ascended into Heaven, comes to us, as we gather around the table, to speak His Truth to us, that *he who believes and is baptised will be saved, and only he who does not believe will be condemned.* For that is the reality in which we live, as His Church and His Christians, now that He is ascended into Heaven. As we also hear it tonight: *After the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into Heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed the Word through the signs that followed them.* As His Church proclaims His salvation to the world, He Himself works with her and in her and confirms the Word He has entrusted to her to preach. That He is ascended into Heaven does not mean that He has left His Church alone; He really has not left His Church at all. Seated at the right hand of the Majesty on High He lives and works salvation in His Church.

Or does He, now? Some think that He does not, at least not in His *faithful* Church, where it is His salvation that is preached and taught and worshipped, rather than something else. No, for as we hear it tonight, in those days *the Lord worked with them and confirmed the Word through the signs that followed them,* just as, as we also hear it that He said it: *These signs will follow those who believe: In my name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands upon the sick, and they will recover.* And we no longer see much of such signs among us, now, do we?

And because of that unbelief and hardness of heart which causes even Christians to not be content to believe the testimony of Holy Scripture, that He lives and reigns, we easily come to think that the absence of such signs goes to show that He no longer lives and works salvation in His Church, and to doubt that He lives and reigns at all.

Therefore is it that some have felt the need to form churches where these signs are what is preached and taught and worshipped, rather than His salvation, and to seek to force our Lord Jesus to make these signs appear, and to pretend that they do, and that He does, when they command Him to.

Well, even His faithful Christians can come to long to see the Word confirmed, perhaps not necessarily by such dramatic signs as those of which we hear tonight, so much, even though they might make Church a bit more exciting and entertaining; but we long to see His promises confirmed in our lives, do we not, and in our hearts and minds, more than we do. Faith, though, is to submit and surrender to God and trust in His goodness and His promises, as Holy Scripture teaches Christians to do, and the Gospel according to Saint Mark, again, perhaps, in particular, also when we neither feel His goodness nor see signs of it, nor see His promises fulfilled the way we would like to.

Such signs not being seen is *not* a sign that the Lord is not working with His faithful Church who preaches what He has entrusted to her to preach, that is: His Word of salvation; after all, the signs were always only exactly that, *signs* by which the Lord *confirmed the Word* in those early days.

And again, what faith is is to trust in the goodness of God and believe in His promises, in spite of all that we see or do not see, and feel or do not feel. To faith, the reality of which the signs are and always only were, well, signs, must always mean more than the signs themselves: that our Lord Jesus as the Saviour of sinners sets us free from slavery to Satan and gives to us the language of praise and worship, and makes us not to be harmed by the venom of that ancient serpent Satan, nor by any other venom, and to recover from the deadly sickness that sin is unto health and eternal life with Himself in that fullness of glory and good which is His heavenly Kingdom.

Now, when we look through Holy Scripture, it seems that such signs ceased to be seen in the Church already in the age of the Apostles. More importantly, though, when it comes to the Kingdom of God, it is just not true that *seeing is believing*; and, for that matter, *feeling* is not believing, either.

Faith is not a function of the flesh, that is: it is not of human nature, not a psychological phenomenon, rather, it is the work of God, His gracious gift to those whom He will save, and more than that, it is Himself and His own life in us.

The Lord Himself works salvation through His Word of salvation. As He had said it already earlier of the men He would set and send to speak His Word of salvation: *It is not you who speak, but rather the Holy Spirit.* In the Word He has His Church proclaim, of His salvation, the Holy Spirit speaks, who is the Spirit of God, and God Himself, and so is also the Spirit of our Lord Jesus, who is Himself God from eternity. Yes. The Spirit is His own life and breath; in both the Biblical languages, the words for *Spirit* and *breath* are the same. And the Spirit is His very innermost self, as the spirit of any person is his very innermost self.

In His Word of salvation, the Son of God speaks Himself, and breathes His own life into those who hear, so that His own life is in us; and so He not only confirms the Word more powerfully than dramatic signs ever could, He also overcomes our unbelief and hardness of heart as He makes us to come alive from the death of disobedience and defiance and makes us to begin to believe His living testimony of His love and what His love has done for us.

And He works salvation with His Word of salvation not only in that He works *faith*, but also in this: that His Word of salvation is His *declaration* of salvation, and that with it, His salvation is actually given, fully and for real, to all who hear it and take it to heart. For He has Himself brought His salvation to completion, so that there is nothing lacking, nothing left for us sinners to do. He had Himself baptised into our sin to bear it for us, and His own judgement against it, and so our sin is dealt with and done away with. And as He was baptised into our sin and our death, He has sinners baptised into His perfect righteousness and His eternal life. *He that believes and is baptised shall be saved*, as He said it, as we hear it tonight, and He Himself makes us to do that, with His Word, and only *he who does not believe shall be condemned*. And in the life of His Church, as we gather at His table, He continues to give Himself to sinners, and His eternal life, with His Word, and with His body and blood in the festive meal of salvation. Ascended into Heaven He is in the glory of God, which fills all things, and so He is in His Church, and lives and reigns in her, for our salvation.

Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing. *Amen.*