



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Waiting and Working

**1 Peter 4:7-11 &
St. John 15:25-16:4**

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May 28, 2017 – Ascension Sunday

As I said in the homily this past Thursday, on Ascension Day, the Ascension is sort of the Church's lost or forgotten great holy day. Some people say that's because it falls mid-week on a Thursday. That probably doesn't help, but I don't think falling mid-week is the problem. We remember and we understand Epiphany well enough and it often falls mid-week. And we remember and understand Maundy Thursday. And Good Friday—the Cross is at the centre of our lives as Christians. No, I think the reason we think so little of the Ascension is that we don't truly understand its significance. And this is sad, because the Ascension is as important as Good Friday and Easter and Pentecost. It's an integral part of this whole seasonal sequence. It ought to be especially important for us, the people of Living Word Church. We bear the name of Jesus, who is the true, incarnate, and living Word of God.

On Good Friday we remember that Jesus died as a sacrifice for our sins—the spotless lamb of God dying the death that his people deserved. When he died he broke the chain that binds us in sin. And on Easter we remember that Jesus didn't stay dead. He rose. Easter is a celebration of his empty tomb. The world rejected him and killed him, but God over-ruled the world's verdict and undid the world's unjust execution of Jesus. On Easter we celebrate the vindication of Jesus by his Father. Jesus truly is the world's Messiah. His Father has declared it so in the most dramatic way possible. And in rising from death, Jesus has given us a promise, he's given us hope that we, his people, will one day rise from the grave as he has. Think of the Israelites being led out of their slavery in Egypt—that's Good Friday. And then think of them being led into a

new life in the Promised Land—that's Easter. Jesus set in motion the events and forces that will restore both humanity and all of his Creation.

But that's not the end of it. Forty days after Easter we celebrate Jesus' Ascension. Like the son of Man in Daniel 7, he was rejected, he was vindicated by his Father, and he ascended on the clouds to take up his sovereign and eternal rule. Like Caesar, who was said to ascend into heaven at his death to become a god, Jesus really did—although he was already God. But what Caesar pretended at, Jesus did for real. In the Ascension he proved himself the world's true Lord.

But the Lord doesn't leave us alone. As we've seen in the Gospel lessons these last few weeks, Jesus promised he'd be back. When every enemy has been vanquished, when his kingdom preparations in both heaven and earth have been completed, Jesus will return on the clouds, just as he ascended. He will bring his kingdom with him, and like an ancient emperor in his triumphal procession, Jesus will be ushered into his kingdom by the great multitude of saints who have gone before us. But, again, today the Church reminds us that in this in-between time Jesus has not left us alone.

Today's Gospel comes from the long section of John called Jesus' "farewell discourse". Jesus knew he was going away. It wasn't just that he was going to die. He would rise three days later. But after that he would leave again—ascending to his throne. And he's said: The disciples are sad just thinking of Jesus not being with them, but his leaving is actually a good thing. If he doesn't leave them he can't send this one he calls "the Helper"—the Holy Spirit who will come alongside to equip, to empower, and to advocate for them.

If Jesus doesn't leave them, there can be no Church. It's the Holy Spirit who makes the Church the Church. And if Jesus doesn't leave his people will never sanctified, never transformed and made holy. In his death and resurrection he bought us new life, but without the Holy Spirit that life is nothing but a dream of some future day. It's the Holy Spirit

who applies that future to us today and makes it real here and now, as we wait for it to be completed at the end of the age. Jesus makes all this possible. Jesus sets in motion the forces by which God will make all things new. But it's the Spirit who fills us up, who unites us to Jesus, who does the actual work of regenerating our hearts—changing our desire from sin to holiness—and it's the Spirit who renews our minds—sanctifying our thinking and giving us an understanding of the Good News and helping us to work out the implications of Jesus' lordship for every area of life and ministry.

The disciples wanted Jesus to stay with them forever. But God had something better in mind. He planned for Jesus to ascend, to take his throne, and then to send the Holy Spirit to build on the work that Jesus began. Jesus commissioned his disciples to take the Good News to all the world, to baptise, and to make disciples. He gave them the Spirit to make it all possible. And as we read in Acts 1 on Ascension Day, as the disciples were standing there staring up into the sky two angels appeared asking, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring into the clouds? Just as he left you, Jesus will return. Didn't he give you some important work to do in the meantime?"

It's this promise of the Spirit that we remember during these ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost, between the promise and its fulfilment. And we also remember the work Jesus has called us to do. In the Epistle, St. Peter tells us:

The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.
(1 Peter 4:7)

The end is near. Don't freak out! One of the great conundrums of Christian theology is the timing of Jesus' return—and even what the New Testament writers and Jesus himself mean when they talk about his return or about the "end of all things" as Peter writes here. There are a lot of passages that suggest Jesus expected to be back pretty quickly and a lot of passages suggesting the disciples thought the same. This

morning isn't the time to try to solve this problem, but it's there. In short, much of the problem is the result of us confusing passages about the judgement that was to come on Jerusalem in forty years and the judgement that will come on the nations some time later. However we resolve this, though, it's been a problem for Christians of every age. There's always some group that looks at the "signs of the time" and becomes convinced that the end is tomorrow or next week—it's not a new problem.

As an aside, I'll say that I think the real urgency here comes in the not knowing the date or hour. Again, Jesus commissioned his disciples, he sent the Spirit to equip his Church to carry out their kingdom mission. And when we look around the world it should be very apparently that we still have a *lot* of work to do. To think that Jesus will return tomorrow or next week or next year—even this century—is to think that Jesus would give up on us and on the mission he gave us. Granted, we aren't always very good at doing the work he's called us to do. Like the disciples staring in to the sky, we get distracted—not least by speculating on when and how he's coming back—and too often we commit ourselves to the things of this age instead of the age to come, and we sideline Jesus' kingdom and Jesus' commission to us. But, Brothers and Sisters, Jesus gave us his Spirit for a reason. Day by day he is sanctifying us and generation by generation he is sanctifying and building his Church. One day, whether in a half-a-thousand or ten thousand years our work will be done thanks to his grace, but it's impossible to imagine Jesus giving up on us, giving up on the gift of the Spirit he's given, throwing in the towel, and returning before the Church's work is done.

Peter says that work is accomplished by self-controlled and sober-minded people. People who think the end is about to come tend to get themselves worked up into a frenzy, they tend to freak out, they tend to lose focus. It plays out in all sorts of different ways, but it happens. But Peter tells us: Yes,

the end is at hand and the proper way to respond to it isn't to lose your mind but to exercise self-control and to be sober minded.

This is how Jesus people should act and think. This is how people filled with the Holy Spirit act and think. And it's not a stretch. Self-control *is* a fruit of the Spirit. Self-control is—or should be—a defining characteristic of people who are united to Jesus by the Holy Spirit. And being sober-minded is the fruit of our minds having been renewed by the Holy Spirit. Again, Jesus has given us work to do and it's not going to get done if we're in a panic. Instead of getting worked up, instead of panicking, Peter tells us: *pray*. When Jesus was under pressure, he undergirded his work with prayer. Our response to the pressure and weight of our calling also needs to be prayer.

And as the Church we need to work together, to stick together—to *be* the *Church*. Peter goes on in verses 8-9:

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

It's easy to drive each other away. It's easy to be offended by what this person says or what that person does. We sadly see it all too often in the Church. Someone offends someone else and off they go. It's especially sad when you find out that the offense was an accident or that what was said or done was misconstrued—that no offense was ever intended. Some people can be difficult and, over and over, I've seen Christians who treat difficult people in ways that put them at the fringe or drive them off. Some people just sometimes wander away from the Church and no one goes after them to check up on them. But Peter says that we're to hold *unfailing* love for each other—*unfailing*. I'm reminded of Hebrews 10:24-25:

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one

another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

It's a very similar exhortation. "The Day" is drawing near. Don't panic. Instead, stir each other up to love and good works and do not neglect to meet together.

If someone asked me to write a letter exhorting the Church as to what to do in light of the end of all things being at hand, I'd probably write something about getting out into the world to tell people about Jesus—and to do so with a sense of urgency. But Peter (and the writer of Hebrews) instead tells us to love each other. Brothers and Sisters, what they're saying—and this is important—is that before we do anything else, we, the Church, need to *be* the Church, we need to be the body of Christ. Loving each other, supporting each other, showing hospitality to each other—even when we're sometimes difficult to get along with or overly needy or whatever makes us difficult—and we can all be like this sometimes—loving each other despite our flaws and difficulties and allowing our love for each other to cover those difficulties and offenses and things that can sometimes be abrasive, that kind of love binds us together. And being bound together two things happen. First, we function the way Jesus and the Spirit intend. The Spirit has given us all unique gifts. When we work together we complement each other as we fulfil the mission Jesus has given. But the love we're called to show each other is also a powerful part of our witness. There is no other organization or institution or club in this world that brings together people of such different backgrounds and culture and age and temperament than the Church and in that we have a powerful witness to the redeeming grace of God.

Last week St. James told us to be doers of the word and not hearers only. This is what that looks like. And it's this love and light that plays out amongst Jesus people—amongst *us*—that not only holds us together, but it draws in, it attracts outsiders. It's this love and light that Jesus will be looking for when he returns. Jesus won't come looking for

his Church based on our good theology. As important as good theology is, Jesus will find his Church as he sees the evidence of our faith and belief worked out in practice. (Good theology is important in directing out faith into that Christ-like practice.) Jesus will be saying “Well done, good and faithful servant” based on our having shown love and hospitality and how we’ve treated each other and how we’ve been faithful in proclaiming his lordship to the world. A master doesn’t reward his servant for knowing what he was supposed to do in his absence. He rewards his servant for actually having done it. And it’s just so for us.

Peter goes on in verses 10-11:

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

The Spirit has equipped each of us and we’re called to use these gifts to serve each other. The Spirit doesn’t give us gifts to squander or to use for our own gain. They’re meant to build up the Church and to help us fulfil our mission. And Peter here calls us to be good stewards.

And we’re not just accountable to God; we’re accountable to each other as stewards. How often do we think it’s just “between myself and God”? Regularly I find myself talking to people who tell me that that instead of being part of the Church, they’re opting to live their faith privately and on their own. I have to say I’m always more than a little suspicious of the genuineness of someone’s claim to be a Christians when they have no interest in the Church. You can’t claim to love Jesus and then despise his body! There’s no such thing as a loner Christian and this is in part why. Imagine if tomorrow your eyes or your feet, your heart or your mind decided they weren’t

interested in being part of your body. You’d be in a world of hurt and the same goes for the Church.

More than anything else this is why the Church is so often ineffective in fulfilling our mission. Too many of us our failing to be good stewards of what God has given us for ministry. In the typical church about 10% of the people do 90% of the work. In the typical church about 10% of the people give 90% of the money. I’m glad that we’re not the typical church. We do better than that, but we have room for improvement. But think about it. What if 10% of your body had to do 90% of the work. You wouldn’t live very long. Thankfully our God is gracious. Thankfully he’s built his body in such a way that it doesn’t die if only 10% or 20% of it is working. But at the same time, the body of Christ is crippled if the person gifted to be an ear is also forced by necessity to be eyes and fingers, because the people gifts to be eyes and fingers aren’t using their gifts. Again, Peter’s telling us that if God has gifted you—and he’s generously gifted all of us—don’t hold out. He’s gifted you, he’s equipped you for a reason. Not using your gifts to build up the Church is just as much a sin as anything else. We need to ask ourselves if we’re willing to give back to God for his service a portion of our time and our talent and our treasure. They all came from him in the first place. He’s the one who really owns them. If we’re not willing to give a portion back it not only hurts us individually, but it hurts the whole body.

Think of it this way: To ignore the gifts the Spirit has given us, to squander them, to steward them badly is to live as if Jesus ascended to heaven and then left us all on our own—as if he hadn’t sent his Spirit to come alongside us and to equip us for ministry. To be poor stewards of the Spirit’s gifting is to live as if Jesus died for our sins, but did nothing more—no regenerate heart, no renewed mind. To live apart from the Church. Or to be part of the Church, but to fail to live with each other in unfailing love, Brothers and Sisters, is to live as if there is no Holy Spirit. All

these things are the Spirit’s work and the Spirit’s fruit in the life of the Church. They’re not optional extras. Consider that Jesus thought it important enough we have these things that he left, he ascended, so that he could send the one who would supply and equip us with them. We could have had Jesus with us all the time, to visit our churches to teach us, to sit down with us individually to talked to us and to comfort us, but he thought it was more important for us to have the gift of the Holy Spirit and so he left that the Spirit might be sent.

Think on that this week. Jesus commissioned his people and he sent the Spirit to equip us to get the job done. Someday Jesus will return when the Spirit’s work through us has been finished. In the meantime, we’ve been given a huge job. Don’t panic. Don’t freak out. Be self-controlled and sober-minded. Commit yourselves to prayer, show each other unfailing love, and work together as the body of Christ, being faithful stewards of the gifts the Spirit has given.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, as we acknowledged in the Collect, Jesus has ascended to his heavenly throne, but you have not left us comfortless. You’ve graciously given us the gift of your Spirit and by your Spirit you unite us to Jesus, you transform and sanctify us, and you equip us to do the work Jesus has given. Give us grace and teach us to be faithful stewards of the Spirit’s gifts. Teach us to bear the Spirit’s fruit and let us live that fruit in practical ways and especially as we love one another and as we support one another in using the gifts the Spirit has given as we make Jesus and his kingdom known to the world. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen.