

## ***“Lifting up His Hands He Blessed Them”***

[Adapted from sermon by Dr. Normal Nagel – Cambridge, 1965]

“Then [Jesus] led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands He blessed them.”

We have followed the life of Jesus in this first half of the church year from the wrinkly infant on the straw in the stable to the baby receiving the homage of the Magi. We have followed Him from the boy in the temple to the man to whom John the Baptist pointed – “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29)

Then, baptized by John in the Jordan, the Spirit came down on Jesus and we heard the Father say – “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased,” and at the Transfiguration, “listen to Him.” (Matthew 17:5) Tempted in the wilderness, Jesus held to God’s saving will.

In Lent we followed as Jesus moved to the fulfillment of God’s will – Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. All this so that He might “bless” us.

We are not told what words Jesus spoke in blessing at His Ascension – and we don’t need to know – because we can look at the hands that Jesus raised, and know the blessing.

These are the hands that grasped Mary’s fingers – the hands of God who came to share our human littleness and frailty. These hands folded in temple at 12 years old – and worked with hammer and saw – God Himself sharing, and blessing, our worship and our work.

These are the hands that touched the eyes of the blind and the tongue of the mute – the hands that had taken hold of the pale, cold hand of the little girl and gave her back alive to her wondering father and mother.

We hear so often of these hands – that Jesus stretched them out, touched, or grasped individuals – His love personally given with His healing. He did not heal people by the dozens or lumped together – but was there for each one that needed Him, as His hands took hold of them.

We remember that scene when Jesus – after a full and busy day – worked far into the night, helping and healing. St. Luke tells us – “Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to [Jesus], and He laid His hands on every one of them and healed them.” (Luke 4:40)

These are the hands that gathered the little children into His arms to bless them. These are the hands that gripped Peter when he looked away from Jesus and began to sink. These are the hands that broke the blessed bread and gave them His body to eat. These are the hands that were offered to Thomas and conquered all his doubt.

All this the hands of the Ascending Jesus reveal to us – and we have yet to mention the biggest thing of all – that in these hands we see the print of the nails. The jagged scars tell us of the fullness of the blessing, and how it was won for us.

All our wrong, all our sins – Jesus took on Himself and bore the punishment for them. He was forsaken as we should have been forsaken – but are not. Instead, we are forgiven, because of what Jesus did for us there on the cross – and with that forgiveness, we are made alive again, as the children of God.

Because Jesus’ hands were stretched out on the cross – now, at His Ascension – they are stretched out in blessing. The One who ascends and blesses has the marks of the cross in His hands. No cross, no blessing.

That is why the sign of the cross is made with the Benediction, the Blessing. That is what Jesus’ Ascension means to us – life and blessing – won and given.

St. Luke is very conservative with his words. Jesus lifts up His hands, and St. Luke says – “While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven.” (v. 51) Now, don’t misunderstand – the Ascension of Jesus does not mean that He has gone away – because before He ascends, He promises that – wherever we may be, He is with us.

The difference is that, after the Ascension – Jesus does not show Himself to us anymore. But He will, some day – either at the end of the world, or when we die – whichever comes first.

And that's a good thing. Suppose Jesus continued to show His presence to us after His Ascension. Where would He be this evening? In America, or in Ukraine? People would say – "If He is there, then He is not here."

But because of Jesus' promise and His Ascension, His people in America and Ukraine – and in this room – know that He is with them. The Epistle reading says that He "fills all in all." While we cannot understand the fullness of what this means – or how this can be – His Ascension promise is a blessing to all who believe.

In Acts, St. Luke tells us that "a cloud" took Jesus out of the disciples' sight. This was no ordinary cloud. We've seen it before – at the Transfiguration, and in the Old Testament. A cloud stood above the two angels on the ark of the covenant in the temple – and a cloud led Israel on their journey to the Promised Land.

That cloud was the guarantee that God was with them. So also, the cloud at the Ascension of Jesus – it both hides His presence – and reveals that He is with us always, even unto the end of the age.

In His Ascension, Jesus didn't travel thousands of miles away like some rocket ship, Dr. Nagel would say. He rose up a little way above the earth and a cloud received Him out of their sight. All that was gone was the sight of Jesus. The cloud means that He is no longer within our ordinary limits – rather, He now does all things in the whole range of God's way of doing things.

He is truly God and truly man – a fulfilled and glorified man – who "sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty" – ruling and reigning over all things – exercising the whole power of God – which is in His hands.

The Ascension does not mean that Jesus has gone away – but just the opposite – that He is with us now even more powerfully than when men saw Him. It means that we live in the presence of our ascended, and ever-present Lord.

Because the crucified, risen and ascended Lord is with you – you cannot be destroyed. Jesus has made the way to victory for you.

From heaven above to earth He has come – to be born, suffer, died, be raised to life, and ascend into heaven – to lead you in that way. He has taken on your flesh and blood so that His blood “shed for you” might redeem you from sin and death. His body is given so that your body will be raised to life again, and ascend – when He finally brings you to the bright cloud of heaven.

Blessed by our crucified, risen and ascended Lord – we go on from the Ascension, as did His first disciples – “with great joy.” (Luke 24:52). Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.