

## Where Is the Hope?

Ascension of Our Lord Sun. – 06/01/25 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Ephesians 1:15-23 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 17b-18, 20 [Paul's prayer for the Ephesian Christians and for us believers today is that the Triune God,] **"may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you know what is the hope to which He has called you..."** ... **"when He raised [Christ] from the dead and seated Him at His right in the heavenly places..."**.

### **Introduction**

✧ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

✧ The accepted principle for pastors when they step into a pulpit is that you never start your sermon with a four-letter word, let alone, base the entire sermon around such a word.

➔ Yet, that's exactly what I'm going to do this morning. The four-letter word is h-o-p-e: hope. I know what you're thinking: "Come on Pastor, that doesn't count. Sure, hope has four letters, but Pastor, it's not that kind of four-letter word."

➔ But, I beg to differ with you on that point, because I believe that we live in a world today where talking publicly about hope is about as uncouth as burping out loud at the dinner table. I mean, look – everything is so "bad" today...in fact one of you said in Bible Study last Sunday that "everything is going to hell in a handbasket" – everything is so "bad", how can there be any real hope?

✧ As we have heard in the news and many of us have seen in our own lives, depression and other similar kinds of mental health struggles are on the rise all around us; drug overdoses, a general mistrust of others, and in-your-face hatred is so common that we pretty much expect it and are no longer shocked by it. So, how can I honestly stand up here in front of you today and tell you that you really can have hope; that you already have all that you need to base your entire life upon a certain, life-changing and powerful hope?

### **I. We need hope.**

✧ Let's clear up one huge misconception on the topic of hope first. The contemporary understanding of "hope" is that it is simply a synonym for being "optimistic"; being a glass-half-full kind of person instead of a glass-half-empty; "negative-Nancy."

➔ But the Biblical concept of "hope" is much more substantial than that. In the Bible, "hope" is rooted in the absolutely reliable promises of God. True hope is tied to action, not attitude. The late British Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book *Celebrating Life*, points out that optimism is passive while hope is active. Optimism is having a gym membership that you never use, while hope is actually getting out of your easy chair and going for a walk or a jog every morning.

➔ That means that despair is the opposite of hope. Despair leads to inaction; to guilt; to fear. As Luther writes in the Small Catechism, when we pray "lead us not into temptation" we are asking that the Lord would "guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice" (*Lord's Prayer*, 6<sup>th</sup> Petition).

✧ So, with all of the despair, false belief and overabundance of sin, conflict and trouble around us – just as there has been throughout the annals of history, we need; we crave the real kind of hope. With that kind of active hope, you and I are now able to move through the day; through the year; through all of life. But without hope, everything quickly comes grinding to a halt.

→ So, where can we find this true hope?

## II. False hope is no hope at all.

✖ You see, the thing about false hope is that it causes us to live life trusting in a lie. Many cults, for example, over the years have fixed an actual date on the calendar for the end of world. And many people have built their entire lives around the hope that these predictions will come true. But, in the end, their hope turned out to be a lie.

→ Some of the current predictions, in fact, are fairly specific, like those from Nostradamus and Baba Vanga (a 20th-century Bulgarian mystic) who both said that in the year 2025; this year, there would be a massive war in Europe involving the United Kingdom along with a global economic collapse and another wide-spread pandemic like we had with COVID.

→ Others are more general, without specific years attached, such as the predictions that continued global warming will lead to a runaway greenhouse effect that will make the Earth uninhabitable like the planet Venus.

✖ These kinds of predictions, just like false hope, come with a great cost; leading you and me to be filled with bitterness, disillusion, bad living, and ultimately rebellion against God.

→ In short, false hope leads to despair and unholiness. As Jesus proclaimed in Matthew 7:18, “A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.”

✖ So, here in verse 20 of our text today, Paul ties real, healthy, hope to our Lord Jesus Christ, and specifically to His ascension. He says that because God has raised Jesus “from the dead and seated Him at His right in the heavenly places”, we have true hope for our own future.

## III. Real hope is found in Christ’s ascension.

✖ Though the temptation, not only for those early Christians at the time of Jesus’ ascension but also for us today, might be to think that Jesus abandoned and left us here on earth to go back to heaven so that He no longer has to think about us here in the throes of sin and trouble. But that can’t be further from the truth.

→ Yes, it is true that Satan was cast out of heaven when Jesus arrived and was “seated at [God’s] right” (v.20) in the place of Divine authority and power. But Jesus ascended not to leave us alone against the wiles of the devil and his demonic beasts until His promised return, but instead, you could say that Jesus has been promoted and is actually taking us with Him in the certain and sure hope of His calling so that we can live now in the fullness of His power and His promised presence here with His Church.

→ Think, for example, of how a senior staff person or politician takes a new, higher position and then often takes his/her trusted staff with them to that higher calling. Such is the case with us. Verses 22 and 23 tell us that we are not anywhere near left alone, but that Jesus is “the head over all things” in His church, and we are members of His body, the Church.

→ That means that if “all things” – which means all earthly and devilish powers, influences, governments and temptations...if “all things are under His feet” – that is under His control, then, because we are His body here in His church, they are under our feet as well.

✖ This is hugely important, my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, because this gives us God’s precious gift of hope, founded in our risen and ascended Lord Jesus.

→ You see, our connection to Christ on the heavenly throne means that we are blessed not because we deserve to be blessed, but because Jesus has called us personally into His saving grace. He has given us, as verse 18 says, “the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints.” It’s Jesus then, who has called you and me to sainthood by the will of the Father. And it’s by the

Holy Spirit that you and I are given this godly gift of wisdom and knowledge that Paul talks about in verse 17.

➔ You don't deserve it – neither do I. You haven't earned it – neither have I. We never could and never would in our sin-filled state. This is the Good News then that we have inherited by Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension: our sins are forgiven, and we are made rich in His "immeasurable greatness" and "power" to believe in Him and His saving work for us all.

- ✘ We may not walk, talk, and eat with Jesus as the early disciples did. But if Jesus had not ascended to take up His rightful place beside the Father, just imagine how intensely we sin-soaked Christians would have fought for what we would have considered our "right" to sit next to Him here on earth! Remember, James and John were already starting down that path before Jesus even went to the cross (Mk. 10:37).

➔ But because He is ascended, He is with us all now as His body of believers. We are with Him in Word and Sacrament as He promises to be there in His gifts. And that means we can live the lives of true Christian hope where there are no question marks; no doubt about our future, because we have His unbreakable promise of being in His presence not only now in the midst of our earthly trouble, but forever in "the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (v.23) in heaven.

#### **IV. We have hope.**

- ✘ What a difference this means for us as we still remain here in this world filled with hopelessness. Those messages are bombarding us from every possible angle, "The climate is changing, our cities will be flooded; our coasts destroyed by waves of hurricanes." "Viruses will take away our freedoms and lives." "You can't trust any organization, including the church." "The only solution is hatred, seclusion and violence." "There is no hope!"

➔ Friends, in this time where hearts are aching for hope at any and all cost, understand that the devil is trying hard to fill the void with a plethora of options that all come with a deadly price. "Take this pill and you will live longer." "This stock will make you rich quick." "This political party; this person will save the country." "This ideology; this agenda will make you popular, more accepted, and then everything will be alright." Don't buy it; don't swallow it my friends. Those are nothing but wolves in sheep's clothing. All of them are false hope, and they are all around us.

- ✘ Only Jesus and His ascension gives us real hope. To have "the eyes of your hearts enlightened" as Paul prayed for the Ephesians and all of us as his readers in verse 18, is to have the Triune God's gift of faith; to have the absolute certainty that there is a God and that He cared enough for you to send His Son, Jesus to redeem you.

➔ It is in that one, Holy Christian faith that you know that Jesus was crucified, died, and has now ascended to rule over all things and be with you always to the end of the age, just as He promised in Matthew 28:20; only moments before His ascension.

➔ So that word that we focus on today: "ascension" doesn't mean "gone." It means always present in all the places that He said He would be: in His perfect and powerful Word of truth; in His saving, Spirit-filled water of baptism that "now saves you" as 1 Peter 3:21 promises; and in His true body and blood ... the same body and blood that He sacrificed on the cross to pay for all of our sins, now fed to us in Holy Communion, to forgive us and strengthen us in the sure and certain hope of our place with Jesus in His ascended, heavenly glory.

#### **Conclusion**

- ✘ Yes, we are blessed here in Christ's Church with many great festivals to celebrate. We all love Christmas, celebrating the baby Jesus; the manger, the angels and shepherds. Easter has its

lilies and empty tomb, along with the bewildered disciples. Pentecost pushes us out into the world to be the Body of Christ.

➔ But the Ascension of our Lord is unique because of its central message of hope. This gift of hope that we receive in Christ's ascension centers our faith; strengthens us for what lies ahead; and gives us the promise of a grand and glorious future; of the certainty of our eternal place with Jesus.

✘ It's just as we sang in the hymn before this message,

[God] *"has raised our human nature  
On the clouds to God's right hand;  
There we sit in heav'nly places,  
There with Him in glory stand.  
Jesus reigns, adored by angels;  
Man with God is on the throne.  
By our mighty Lord's ascension  
We by faith behold our own"* (LSB 494:5).

➔ That, dear Christians, is our hope!

✘ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* Amen.