**Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter-C**

**Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Aiken, South Carolina**

06-01-25

Acts 1:12–26

What comfort we find this morning in our epistle and Gospel texts! The Gospel records Jesus praying for his disciples, including you and I, and everyone who would hear the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, and believe.

The epistle is the apostle John’s vision of heaven itself, and God’s people gathered around Jesus, in peace and joy, forever.

John’s vision is of the great eternal day for which we all are now waiting, looking beyond all present circumstances, with that abiding hope that only comes from faith in Jesus’ completed, saving work for us.

But then, there is that other reading; the first one; Acts 1:12-26. While its record of Judas’ death and his eternal fate tend to overshadow the reading, that is not actually the core of the first reading.

Our first reading today is actually an account of Jesus continuing to care for His church, and so, it rightly belongs together with the account of Jesus praying for his disciples, and John’s vision of heaven.

Let’s take a closer look at the text that is our first reading. It begins with the apostles’ return from Olivet, that is, the Mount of Olives, to the upper room, where they have been staying. This is likely the same upper room in which Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper.

The apostles are returning from witnessing Jesus ascend back to heaven. As he stood there, teaching and blessing them, they witnessed him bodily ascend into a cloud, and out of sight. Jesus would no longer be physically present to teach and lead them.

Having ascended back to heaven, Jesus, as He had promised, would send from God the Father the Holy Spirit. We’ll talk more about that next Sunday; for next Sunday is Pentecost.

Jesus has ascended to heaven. Although Jesus is no longer physically present, teaching and leading his church, he still teaches and guides his church by means of the Holy Spirit.

Though Jesus was no longer visibly present among his disciples, he was still very much present, as he himself has promised; “wherever two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.”

This was true in the Upper Room, and it continues to be true today, all over the world, whenever and wherever Christians gather together, including right here, at Bethlehem Lutheran Church.

After Jesus ascended back to heaven, the apostles still had a church to take care of, and their first order of business was to fill a pastoral vacancy.

Though Jesus himself had personally, directly, selected and called the twelve men who would be his apostles, one of them, Judas Iscariot, was unfaithful.

He betrayed Jesus into the hands of those who killed him. Struck with the full realization of what he had done, and absent any faith in God’s undeserved mercy and forgiveness, Judas then went and committed suicide.

Now the office that he'd held was vacant, and Jesus was not around to call the man who would be the next apostle; not directly, anyway.

Jesus still reigns over His church, and the disciples still get to speak directly to Jesus through prayer. There in the Upper Room, the assembly nominated two candidates to fill the vacancy, and they prayed to the Lord to show which one He Himself had chosen. Lots were cast, and the lot fell to Matthias

This is the very same process by which we fill pastoral vacancies to this very day; the names of qualified men are presented to the congregation; with prayer to the Lord, the congregation casts lots, that is, they vote by ballot, and the man with the majority of votes is the called pastor.

In this process, it is still Jesus Christ, through His gathered people, who shows by their ballots, the man whom He himself has chosen, to occupy the preaching office, in that place.

The point is that, although not physically present to listen and talk to us directly, Jesus Christ still reigns among us.

He hears our prayers, and he provides for our needs, both as a parish, gathered together around His word and sacraments, and each of us individually, for he knows and loves each one of us, having purchased us with His own blood.

He has saved you from Satan, from death, and from the eternal penalty of your sins. Such is His love for you that Jesus Christ is never distant or detached.

Rather, He is always near, and involved in the affairs of His church, right down to each one of us. Jesus Christ knows you personally, and He calls you by name.

Through His word and sacraments, Jesus speaks to you the promise of forgiveness for your sins, and eternal life in paradise with Him.

Through His word and sacraments, He sends the Holy Spirit, who moves us to repentance and faith, and guides us in the ways that the Lord would have us to go.

As we walk with faith the paths set before us, we have the great comfort of knowing that it is the Lord Himself who walks with us.

Though none of us are ever perfectly faithful; though we stumble and fall, we do not do so intentionally, willingly, and unrepentantly. Our reaction to our sin is repentance, and faith in Christ’s holy absolution. This is the difference between the faithful and the faithless; this is the difference between Peter and Judas.

Though Peter denied Jesus three times, though he was painfully aware of his failure to be faithful in the heat of the moment, Peter never lost faith.

By the sheer grace of God, the apostle Peter clung to the promise of the Messiah, Jesus, as his merciful Redeemer, and he was, in fact, redeemed.

Judas Iscariot, on the other hand, though also called by Jesus, was a hypocrite from the very beginning. Despite the fact that he was called by Jesus, just like the eleven other apostles, Judas never embraced the call; he never believed. He rejected the very concept of God who loves him, and who had come to give him forgiveness and eternal life.

We know this only because of the Scriptural account. So, on the one hand, we have in Judas an example of one who does not repent and believe, whose hope is in this world, and whose destiny is eternal torment in hell.

On the other hand, in Peter, we have an example of a man who is, at one and the same time, a sinner, and yet a saint; a repentant believer, whose hope is in Christ alone; in other words, a Christian; just like you.

Jesus has ascended to heaven, but He still rules His church by means of the Holy Spirit, whom He sends from the Father, to continue to bless, guide, and protect His church, and all who, through faith in Him, are members of it.

Though he had ascended to heaven, the apostles, through prayer, still spoke directly to the Lord, just as we do today.

The Lord continues to hear our prayers and answer, according to His will, which is always for the good of those who love Him.

As we look forward to that great, eternal day, when we shall know the joy of seeing our Lord face to face, may we find our joy and comfort now in the fact that, even now, Jesus Christ the Lord abides with us, both in us, and among us. Amen.