Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you think you could forget Christmas? Do you think it would be possible if Christmas fell on a Thursday, for example, that it would only be the Sunday after that one of us remembered that we missed Christmas? I don’t think so. I am pretty sure that it if we were getting close to December 25th and there had not been anything in the bulletin about a Christmas service, myself and the other elders would get phone calls and questions, asking about a Christmas service. Right? And the same would be true with Easter; there is no way we would forget Easter. And I realize that that is because they are public holidays and there is a lot of TV advertising about Christmas presents and Easter eggs, and all that, but at their heart, Christmas and Easter are about very important salvation moments – the birth of the Lord Jesus and the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

And if you think about the Apostles’ Creed, which kind of gives us ‘the highlights of salvation,’ if you like, when it comes to what is said about the Lord Jesus, we first read statements about His birth and then we read statements about His death and resurrection. So it makes sense that we give special attention to Christmas and Easter.

But the Apostles’ Creed does not stop with the resurrection of Jesus. Do you remember what it says next about the Lord Jesus? “He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there He shall come to judge the living and the dead.” So together with His birth and His death and resurrection, **the ascension of Jesus is also a ‘highlight of salvation.’** And that kind of begs the question, doesn’t it: Jesus ascended into heaven 40 days after His resurrection. So because Easter was observed on April 12th this year, that means May 21st was Ascension Day. But here we are on the Sunday after May 21st, and there haven’t been any phone calls or questions; no one seems upset that we forgot May 21st. Now, don’t get me wrong, I am not saying that we have to have an Ascension Day service; we could, but we don’t have to. What I am saying is that **Ascension Day is the neglected highlight of the Christian calendar**. We just don’t think about its meaning and its significance nearly as much as we think about Christmas and Easter. So because today is the nearest Sunday to Ascension Day, we will shunt our Jonah sermon to this afternoon’s service, and instead of looking at Lord’s Day 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which would have been our next Lord’s Day in our journey through the Catechism, we will skip ahead to Lord’s Day 18, which is about the Ascension of Jesus.

So what we want to see today is that **the Ascension of the Lord Jesus Benefits Believers**. And we will consider the **benefits** of the Ascension as the second point of the sermon. And these are truly beautiful and incredibly important for the Christian life. But first off we need to be clear about the **meaning** of the Ascension. And we have to do this because there are different understandings of the Ascension, as we shall see.

1. So we begin with the **meaning** of the Ascension.
   1. And we will start with Scripture and Creed and Confession:
      1. The two places in Scripture that describe the Ascension are Luke 24and Acts 1. Let’s read both. **Luke 24:50-53**: “*Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God*.” **Acts 1:6-11**: “*So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."”*
      2. So having read Luke 24 and Acts 1, I am sure you can see why all three of the historic creeds of the church, the Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed, say that Jesus “ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father.” Simple, right?
   2. So, there it is: God’s inspired and inerrant Word tells us what happened on the original Ascension Day, and all three historic creeds summarize what happened. So you might think that it’s all very straight-forward and we could end point one of our sermon here. You would think, for example, that any guest visiting our church on a Lord’s Supper Sunday who said, I am a Christian, I am a member of a church, and not only do I know the Creeds, I believe what they say, would share the same faith as us. Right? But sadly, that is just not the case. And I want to show you how this is so in relation to the ascension.
      1. **Pastor Dawn is the minister at Holy Cross Lutheran church in Toronto**. Lutheran church, mind you; a very close cousin of the Reformed Church. Her church holds to the Creeds and she believes in the Ascension. But I want you to listen to her Ascension Day article on the church website; it is called ‘*The Ascension Never Happened – Ascension is Always Happening*.’

She wrote, ***The Ascension never actually happened. It is not an historical event. If a tourist with a video camera had been there in Bethany they would have recorded absolutely nothing.***

**She wrote, *I know what the Nicene Creed says, “Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” But ... as I do not understand the Bible literally, neither do I understand the Nicene Creed to be a literal interpretation of the faith.”***

**For Pastor Dawn, Jesus was a human like you and me, and he died as we do and did not physically rise again. But His disciples continued to experience His presence after he died in ways that defied description. So they invented stories to explain this, including the resurrection and the ascension.**

**She wrote, *The … Ascension story is not so miraculous after all. [It] is about the joy the disciples felt about the … ever so real presence of Jesus after his death … In Jesus’ departure they discovered that they could love as wastefully as he did.  They could live abundantly as Jesus did. They could heal and reconcile just as Jesus did.***

**She wrote**, “***We would do well to remember that the Creeds were developed to answer questions about the faith in a time when people understood the cosmos to be comprised of a flat earth, where God resides above in the heavens and located beneath the earth were the pits of hell. [*But*] I know that the universe is infinite.  I also know about gravity. I also know that it is highly unlikely that Jesus had helium flowing through his veins.  I’ve flown around the world, and I can tell you that there is no heaven above the clouds. So, I can say with confidence that: The very present Jesus of resurrection faith did not literally elevate into heaven while his disciples looked on.*”**

So according to Pastor Dawn, and congregation she is not alone in the wider church, today, I assure you, ascension is not about Jesus going up to heaven, but about the love of a man who lived and died 2000 years ago ascending in your heart so that you love others. But Pastor Dawn would say, I am a Christian, I am a member of a church, and I believe in the Ascension.

* + 1. Now, knowing you all as I do, I know that you will be stunned and shocked that someone who claims to be a Christian would deny the divinity of Christ, and the physical resurrection and physical ascension of Christ! And what makes it worse is that she gives credit for her beliefs to the teachings of a minister from Auckland’s very own St. Matthews in the City!
    2. And congregation, this is **part of the reason why we are a confessional church**. Have a look at **Q/A 46** of the Heidelberg Catechism: “*Q. What do you mean by saying, ‘He ascended into heaven’? A. That Christ, while His disciples watched, was lifted up from the earth into heaven and will be there for our good until He comes again to judge the living and the dead*.”
       1. Sadly, it just isn’t enough, today, to ask people if they believe in Jesus and go to church and agree with the creeds. The Christ we must believe in order to be saved is fully man and fully God, and He physically rose from death, and, physically and literally, “while His disciples watched, was lifted up from the earth into heaven.”
       2. I am sure if I asked all you boys and girls where Jesus is now, you would say, “He is in heaven.” And you would be right. That is not a scientifically ignorant first century believer view or a little child’s view; that is the truth! Jesus Christ literally and physically ascended from earth to heaven. And we must believe this for Jesus to be our Saviour, and it is only if we believe this that we have unity in faith.

1. So before we continue on to our second point, I must ask you if you believe that Jesus is God and man and that He literally and physically ascended from earth to heaven? For if you do not, then you do not know the Jesus of the Bible and He is not yet your Saviour. But if you do believe then the **benefits** of His ascension that we are about to discuss as our second point are all yours! And we will start this point with Q/A 49 of our Catechism and then see how these things are taught in God’s Holy Word. *Q. How does Christ's ascension to heaven benefit us? A. First, he pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of his Father. Second, we have our own flesh in heaven; a guarantee that Christ our head will take us, his members, to himself in heaven. Third, he sends his Spirit to us on earth as a further guarantee. By the Spirit's power we make the goal of our lives, not earthly things, but the things above where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand.* 
   1. So let’s take these benefits one at a time: “**He pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of His Father**.”
      1. So, thinking back to the OT, how did the people of Israel deal with their sins? What did they have to do, regularly, to remove their guilt? Sacrifice. And did they do sacrifices themselves? No, it was the priests who did the sacrifices on behalf of the people. And perhaps the most important day of sacrifice every year was the Day of Atonement. Just once a year, the blood of a sacrifice would be sprinkled on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place. And did every Israelite take it in turns to go in to the MHP and sprinkle blood on the Ark? No. Only the High Priest went in.
      2. But think about it, if they had to offer sacrifices over and over and over again, and even the day of Atonement happened every year, and the High Priest had first to sacrifice for himself before he was allowed to go in and sacrifice for the people, then it was plain that all of those sacrifices didn’t actually remove guilt; they simply pointed forward to a perfect Priest and a perfect sacrifice. And what NT Book has that as its message? The Book of Hebrews. Listen to these verses from Hebrews:
         1. **Hebrews 10:4**, “*For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*.”
         2. **Hebrews 7:27ff**, Jesus Christ “*has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. [We have Jesus Christ as our] high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.”*
         3. **Hebrews 9:24** says, “*For Christ has entered … into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf*.”
         4. And this is what A49 is talking about when it says, “He pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of His Father.” Every day the ascended Lord Jesus reminds the Father that He *offered* and *was* the perfect sacrifice. So when the Father looks at you, believer, He sees Jesus! By faith, you are united with Jesus. Therefore, the Father sees you as holy and righteous and blameless and perfect. You see your lies and your selfishness and your lust and your disobedience, but the Father sees you as righteous because Jesus is in heaven pleading your cause. Isn’t that wonderful?!
   2. But secondly, because Jesus ascended to heaven, you have **a guarantee that He will take you to be with Him in heaven**.
      1. In **John 14:2ff**, Jesus said to His disciples, “*In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am*.”
      2. And in **John 17:24**, Jesus prayed about returning to heaven to enjoy again the fellowship that He had enjoyed with the Father before He came to live in earth as God and man. And knowing that the Father would receive Him into heaven at His ascension, Jesus prayed, “*Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am*.”
      3. And what these prayers mean, people of God, is that there is a person with a human nature, just like yours, in heaven today – the Lord Jesus. There are so many things in life that trouble us and hurt us, and that will ultimately lead to our death. But beyond this life there is heaven! So yes, let’s work for a vaccine for Covid-19 and a cure for cancer, and let’s help the homeless and visit the prisoner, but Jesus was very clear, you will always have the poor with you, and there will be earthquakes and wars and pandemics and death for as long as human history continues. But there is a place where God “*will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away*.” The hymn writer calls it **Jerusalem the Golden**. We will sing about it shortly! It is heaven. And because Jesus is there already and because of His promises, we can have total confidence that one day we shall be with Him in heaven! Isn’t that fantastic?!
   3. And thirdly, “**He sends His Spirit to us on earth**.” Looking forward to when He had ascended to heaven, Jesus said in **John 14:16**, “*And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever*.”
      1. Can any of you live the Christian life by yourself and without help? Of course not. We are so prone to sin and to doubt, aren’t we. But from heaven, Christ has sent us another Helper – the Holy Spirit. It is He who fills us with Christ and His Word. It is He who helps us put to death the deeds of the flesh. It is He who “*helps us in our weakness and … intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words*.” It is He who helps us “*seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God*.” And He will never leave us! Isn’t that incredible?

Brothers and Sisters, young people and boys and girls, the ascended Jesus pleads our cause in heaven, is our guarantee that one day we will be in heaven too, and sends us His Spirit to help us with every aspect of the Christian life. These are the benefits of the fact that Jesus ascended to heaven.

So we must say to Pastor Dawn that the Ascension is not about the love of a man who lived and died 2000 years ago ascending in our hearts so that we love others. No no, we need so much more than that! A moment ago I quoted from **Colossians 3:1**, where we are commanded to “*seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God*.” That is what the Ascension of Jesus is about – “Christ, while His disciples watched, was lifted up from the earth into heaven and will be there for our good until He comes again to judge the living and the dead.” And you better believe it! Amen.