

Sermon on Lord's Day 18
By Rev. Stephen t'Hart

Order Of Worship (Liturgy)

Liturgy from 1984 Book of Praise

Psalm 98:1,2

Hymn 1A – Apostles Creed

Hymn 30:1-5 (collection)

Hymn 31:1,3

Psalm 98:3,4

Read: John 14:1-11; John 16:5-15; Acts 1:1-11

Text: Lord's Day 18

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Most of us say “Goodbye” almost every day when the husband goes to work or the children go to school or when our visitors go back home again. It is normally quite painless to say goodbye – a quick kiss – if that – and one is on his way. But at times the “goodbye” is more final, and as a consequence more painful. Many of you would have experienced teary farewells at an airport. It can hurt so much to say goodbye! But while it may be sad for those “leaving on that Jet Plane” it is normally harder for those who stay behind! When you leave your parents, your friends and your home town, you know you will miss all of that. But you have something to look forward to. For those who are left behind, there is nothing to look forward to, except for an empty space at the table, missing out on the grandchildren's lives, a hole in the lives of those left behind and a bigger hole in their hearts.

For 33 years, our Lord Jesus Christ lived, breathed and walked on this earth. And then He left us. He went way up in the sky. A cloud covered Him. And He was gone. And sometimes we can feel pretty lonely here on earth, without Jesus right there to talk to, to touch, and to have comfort us. It feels like heaven is a long way away. And while we know in theory that one day He will return on the clouds of heaven, how about the here and now? Jesus went on to better things, did he not? To sit down at the right hand of God the Father. To be as a man as well as God in the heavenly realms forever more. But what about those left behind?

For us, it is not so bad. We never experienced having Jesus walk and talk directly to us. For 2000 years now, Christ has been in heaven, while man has remained on earth. But it was not like that for the disciples. They had personally experienced what it was like to have Jesus Christ walk with them and talk with them face to face. But then He told them in John 13:33, “Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come,’ so now I say to you.” The disciples would have been confused, upset, and especially filled with dread. The Lord Jesus going away? Please no! But then in John 16:7, he says something surprising. “Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away!” That means that Christ did not in the first place go to heaven just because His job was done and He wanted to get out of here as soon as possible. Christ did not go to heaven in the first place that He be glorified for His own sake. But He ascended into heaven for our benefit. And so the first and last question and answers of Lord's Day 18 focus on the fact that Christ, before the eyes of His disciples, was taken up from the earth into heaven, and that He is there for our benefit.

That is the good news of Christ's ascension that I wish to preach to you this afternoon. And I will do so under the following heading:

Christ's ascension into heaven assures us that we are fit to live in the presence of God.

The benefit of having our flesh in heaven.

The benefit of having our Savior in heaven.

1. The benefit of having our flesh in heaven.

The Heidelberg Catechism was written in 1563. There had been hopes before this time that the followers of Martin Luther and the followers of John Calvin would be able to unite into one Reformation church. Unfortunately, however, these discussions broke down on the question of how Christ is present with us today. The Lutherans had what is called a ubiquitous view of Christ's body. (The word ubiquitous means that something is present everywhere at the same time.) They taught the following: Since Christ promised us in Matthew 28:20 that "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age", He must still be with us today. They also taught that since God's right hand is present everywhere, Christ's body must also be present everywhere. And from that understanding came the conclusion that the body and blood of Christ must be in, with and under the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. The Reformed, on the other hand, said that with respect to His human nature, Christ is no longer present with us. So while the Lutherans said that Christ is everywhere both physically and spiritually, the Reformed said that while Christ is with us spiritually, His physical body is in heaven.

Many people are disappointed about this disagreement and see it as theological nitpicking. In fact some of you might be aware of the merger in Holland between the old Dutch Reformed Church, the Synodical Reformed Churches and the Lutheran Church, creating what is now known as the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. Including the small Lutheran Church in that unification was a bold statement implying that the differences between the Lutherans and the Reformed were of little consequence and that we should put these differences aside in order to fulfill Christ's prayer in John 17 that we might all be one.

Nevertheless, in this Reformed church we still have Lord's Day 18 as part of this church's confession. And this Lord's Day deliberately places the Lutheran and Reformed views of Christ's ascension in sharp contrast. And I think that considering that to this day we esteem Martin Luther very highly, we'd do well to assume that this is an important matter for our faith, and not mere theological nitpicking.

In the first place, the Bible makes it quite clear that while Christ promises to be with us always, as man, He has left. In Matthew 26:11 He said, "You have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always." And John 14:2, "In my father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." And John 16:28, "I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father." And Luke 24:50 says that while Jesus blessed His disciples, "He was parted from them and carried up into heaven." And He did not go up into heaven to return in some ubiquitous way, where His body is everywhere present at the same time. The angels specifically said in Acts 1:11, "This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven." Where is Jesus today? As man, Jesus is in heaven. As true man, he is in heaven and only in heaven, and will remain there until the last day.

Our Lord Jesus is true God and true man. He is fully divine and fully human. While it is true that we may never forget that Jesus Christ is God, we may not understand His divinity in such a way that the reality of His humanity is destroyed.

There is something special about having human flesh and blood in heaven. Christ did not take off humanity like we would take off dirty work boots before entering a clean house. Although His body was glorified when He rose from the dead, and could no longer get sick or deteriorate with age, it was the same flesh and blood that Christ inherited from his mother Mary. If His blood type was Group A on earth, His blood type is Group A in heaven. We have our flesh in heaven!

And that is not mere theological nit picking. Last week I preached on how Christ's resurrection assures us of our salvation, that we have been declared righteous before God. A huge question for all of us is, "Am I fit to go to heaven?" Am I fit to live in the presence of God?

God made man in His own image. Adam and Eve were called by God to be His image bearers and have dominion or rule the earth on His behalf. And in the evening, in the cool of the day, God would actually walk with Adam and talk with him. But when Adam and Eve fell into sin, God was no longer One they could be with. In fear they covered up their nakedness, ran away and hid. Then when God punished them, he sent them out of the garden of Eden to give the clear message that they could no longer live in His presence. And then it says in Genesis 3:24, "So He drove out the man." The garden of Eden, which was really God's Temple, His dwelling place on earth, needed to be cleansed of sin, and so sinful Adam and Eve had to be driven out. Human flesh could no longer be accepted in the presence of holy God.

And then God blocked the way back to the garden. Genesis 3:24, "and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life." And these cherubs were not cute little babies with wings. They were angels, God's soldiers, protecting His holiness, and keeping sinful flesh from approaching His presence.

But God had a plan to save a people for Himself, and so He made a covenant with Abraham and His seed. He chose to live with His people Israel in the Temple. However, there still had to be distance between God and man. God's special dwelling place was in the ark, in that Most Holy Place, where He dwelt between the cherubim. Images of the Cherubim, God's heavenly angels, were made on the top of the ark to protect His holiness. Then between the Most Holy Place and the Holy Place in the Temple, there was a curtain. And on this curtain there were pictures of Cherubim. Those cherubs or angels were like the ultimate red light or no-entry sign. God is holy; let no human being enter into His presence.

But God had a plan not just to save people from hell, but to bring them back into His presence, so that man could live with God again! And to fulfill this plan, He sent His Son Jesus, who was and is true God to become and remain true man. And when Jesus died on the cross, the Temple curtain was torn from top to bottom. And with that temple curtain were those cherubim, those angels. No longer did these special angels have to keep human flesh from entering into God's presence. For in Jesus Christ the debt had been paid, and in principle, man was once again fit to live in the presence of God. And now in our reading from Acts 1, we meet up with two men, heavenly beings, dressed in white. Angels is what they were. They had no swords, nor did they come to block the way. Instead, they came to confirm to the disciples that what they saw really and truly happened. Jesus Christ, flesh of our flesh and bone of our bones, physically and bodily went up into the sky, and was taken into heaven. With respect to His human nature, Jesus Christ went to heaven to remain until the last day.

True human flesh and blood is now in heaven, seated at the right hand of God. The debt has been paid, and Christ ascended into heaven as a sure pledge or promise that He will also take us His members up to Himself.

Jesus said in John 16:7 that it was for our advantage that He was going away. He ascended into heaven as our head, or as our representative. And what happens to the head, happens to the whole body! As Ephesians 2:4-6 teaches us,

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

Christ is in heaven as our representative. In Christ, it is as if we were already there in the heavenly places, in the bosom of the Father, seated at His right hand. Answer 49 of the Catechism says in the second part,

“We have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself.”

That is the benefit of having our flesh in heaven. And that is one of the reasons why that debate between the Calvinists and the Lutherans 450 years ago was more than mere theological nitpicking. We don't need Christ's physical body in, with and under the bread and wine in holy Communion. His physical body is where God wants it to be: in one piece in heaven, declaring to all that we His people are fit to live in the presence of God.

2. The benefit of having our Savior in heaven.

By nature, we are not fit to live in the presence of God. By nature we are impure, sinful, unholy and corrupt. We know that Christ came to change that, and that by His death He redeemed us fully.

Because of that, He could ascend into heaven to claim the victory that He had won. And so He is there.

Not just in Spirit and not as a pseudo body that is everywhere at the same time. He is there in heaven as true man for our benefit.

It is comforting for us to know that Christ is there in heaven. One of the things that bothers us deeply is that although we know that Christ came to save us, the closer we examine ourselves, the worse we look! How then can we hope to have access to God? When we come to him, won't those cherubim suddenly re-appear to block us off, to stop us from coming closer to the throne of God?

They would if of ourselves we came directly to God the Father. The only way we can come to God the Father is through Jesus Christ. The Belgic Confession puts it nicely in article 26 where it says that “we have no access to God except through the only Mediator and Advocate Jesus Christ the righteous. For this purpose He became man, uniting together the divine and human nature, that we men might not be barred from but have access to the divine majesty.”

When we come to God through Christ, Our Lord Jesus declares that through Him who is our Head and Representative, our sins are forgiven, and that we are once more holy and blameless, giving us the right to boldly come before the throne of God. And that is why we pray in Christ's name! We pray in the Name of the One who in His true human flesh and blood is at the right hand of God declaring, “This one is Mine. I have forgiven all of her sins. I have made her holy, perfect and beautiful. She is still on earth, and still sins. But I have already died for those sins and taken them all away. I have removed the enmity between her and God, and I am bringing her one day at a time to live with God in heavenly joy forever!”

Since we have our flesh in heaven already, we may be sure that it is only a matter of time before we can all be in God's holy presence. Christ's ascension was not to drive us apart, but to ensure that we can be together for all eternity. John 14:2,3 –

“In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”

Christ's body is not spread all over the place so that we will never see it in one piece again. His body is in one piece, in heaven, and in heaven He is directing this world and preparing everything for that Great Day when we will be with Him for all eternity.

But there is more to say. Christ is not simply true man: He is also and at the same time true God. And so answer 47 of the Catechism teaches us that although with respect to His human nature Christ is in heaven, “with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace and Spirit He is never absent from us.” And answer 49 explains further that Christ sends us “His Spirit as a counter pledge, by whose power we seek the

things that are above.” It is not just that one day we will go to be with God in heaven. Already today, God the Holy Spirit has come down to live with us here on earth!

By His Spirit, Christ remains with us today. We are still flesh and blood people on a sin filled earth. Our heads are often bowed down and focused on the problems of this world. But Christ has sent us His Spirit so that we might “lift our hearts on high in heaven, where Christ, our advocate, is, at the right hand of His heavenly Father.”

That last sentence about lifting our hearts on high in heaven where Christ our advocate is, comes from the form for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. It is appropriate that we are reminded of Christ’s ascension just before we take from the bread and wine. When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper together, we will not be eating the true body and drinking the true blood of Christ. Nor will the physical body of blood be mysteriously in, with and under the bread and wine. But through His Spirit, Christ will strengthen us with that bread and wine by directing us to where he really is. Spiritually, he is never absent from us. But physically, he is in heaven, pleading on your behalf before the Father, and giving you the guarantee that you will later be with Him for all eternity.

Saying goodbye is never easy. Separation normally brings with it pain, and it is often harder for the ones who stay behind. On the surface, it would be nice if Jesus did not go away. It would be nice if he could bodily be with us still today. But Christ was right: it was to our advantage that He went away! He is now our advocate, defending us before the Father, and He is preparing a place for us. And one day, He will come again. The true, physical body of Christ will come down on the clouds of heaven. And then at the trumpet’s sound, our flesh will be raised and our bodies will be changed to be like Christ’s glorious body. And then we too, in body and soul, will live in the dwelling place of God forever! Amen.