

*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.<sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.<sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.<sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4)*

## **You Died!**

What is the proper greeting for tonight, the Festival of the Ascension? We all say, “Merry Christmas” and “Happy Easter.” We’re even getting used to “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” But what do we say for Ascension Day? “Happy Ascension”? “Merry Ascension”? “How’s the weather up there”? I have a suggestion – at least for this year: “Rest in peace.” Does that surprise you? Rest in peace isn’t really a greeting. It’s something we say at the graveside of someone we once knew. But it totally applies to you and me. In fact, you can think of this evening as your funeral service. And don’t tell me that I’m jumping the gun. Don’t quote that Monty Python movie, “I’m not dead yet!” because St. Paul says you are. Did you hear that in our reading from Colossians? **You died.**

### **I.**

Now, we often say that we *were* dead in transgressions and sins but Jesus made us alive. Of course, St. Paul said that, too, in the companion letter to Colossians, the letter to the Ephesians. But when we say that, we’re talking about our sinful nature. Tonight, St. Paul uses that image of being dead to talk about the opposite. He says, **“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”** Here, dying is a good thing. It means being alive, but in a secret way, a way that no one can see while we live here. **You died and your real life is in heaven.**

What is Paul talking about? In the chapter before our lesson, he said that we were buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him by the power of God. He’s talking about how God connected us to Jesus and gave us all that Jesus did while he was here on this earth. God did that in our baptism. Now, when we baptize someone here in church, we usually do it at the beginning of the service. We bring the person to be baptized up at the end of the first hymn and I read a statement about what baptism means. We pray. We confess the Apostles Creed. I make the sign of the cross on the head and on the heart. Then, if it’s a baby, someone holds him or her over the water. If it’s a little bit older child, I put a step stool here from him or her to stand on. Of course, an adult simply bends over the water. Up to that point, we haven’t done anything that Jesus actually commands us to do in a baptism. But then I take the water and I pour it on that child or that adult and I say, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” That’s the baptism.

That’s when that person dies and rises. At the moment that you’re being baptized, it’s like you’re there on Calvary, having your hands and feet nailed to the cross. It’s like you’re there listening not just to the mockery of Jesus’ enemies but to God’s own disapproval of your sin. It’s like you join Jesus when his Father abandons him and then you die with him. All that happens to you in God’s mind and heart, even though we never actually go through any of it. Because we are joined to Christ, we died. We paid. Our sin is over because Jesus died and paid for all of it. Then we rise with Christ. Because all our sins are paid for and gone, there’s nothing to keep us in the grave. We are glued to the Lord as he conquers death and leaves that tomb behind. So we leave behind all our sin and all our guilt. We are holy and perfect in God’s sight forever.

So Paul says, **“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”** Dying in the Bible always implies some kind of separation. When we die physically, our souls and our bodies separate. When Paul said we were dead in transgressions and sins, he meant that we were totally separated from God. So what does he mean here? We are totally separated from all the sin that we are guilty of. In fact, we’re separated from life down here. Our real and true existence is the life to come. This is just an introduction. For every day that we spend here, we’ll spend millions of years with Christ after the resurrection. So what matters is not this time here. It’s the time to come.

But there’s another side to this. God reached into our hearts and gave us a new nature, the new man. That new man inside us is our true self. It’s the only part of us that’s going to last. When we die, what part of us goes to heaven? Not the old man. Not the corrupt sinner that hates God. The new man lives on. When that

day comes, we will finally be free from all weakness and doubt and failure. We'll never sin again. The really hard part to understand is that all that is happening now. God sees us that way because of our faith. But also, the new man is holy and dedicates all he does to serving God. That is our real life.

But that life is hidden while we're here. When people look at us, what do they see? Sometimes, they do see the new man coming out. But how often do they see something else? How often do they see a selfish person? How often do they see an angry person or a spiteful person? There are people out there who have nothing good to say about me because they've seen my old man coming out. Our new life is hidden from them. Sometimes, it's even hidden from us sometimes. There are so many things I wish I could redo. There are so many conversations, so many actions, that I wish that I could just erase – from my memory if not from my history. Can't you say the same?

Our real life is our new life. But our old sinful life gets in the way and we can't always see it. So we feel guilty and frustrated and we may even engage in destructive behavior. But St. Paul said, **“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”** You have been raised. Christ has paid for all those sins that you can't forget. Christ has paid for all those sins that other people throw up in your face. Christ died and he rose and he wiped away all record of that Old Man that lives in your heart. God does see you as perfect. And God did make you new by faith. And you will be free from that old man one day. Focus on that day that's coming. Focus on the gift God is giving you. That gospel of life and love and forgiveness is God's power to conquer the sin in your life today.

## II.

So, you're dead now. Dead to sin. Dead to this world. Dead to all the things that don't matter here and now. That has to mean a radical shift in our priorities for the time we have left here. **You died and your real glory is still coming.** That's what Ascension is really all about: knowing what matters and what's coming. On that Thursday afternoon when Jesus led his disciples out toward Bethany, he knew that he was about to rock their world once again. He gave them final instructions. He repeated promises that he had given them in the past, because this was their last group conversation before they all went to heaven. Then Jesus gave them one final, dramatic miracle to remember. He was lifted up into the air and a cloud hid him from their sight. They did what we would've done. They stood there, staring up into the sky at the spot where Jesus had disappeared. Maybe they even had their mouths hanging open.

And then those angels came and asked, **“Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”** Being separated from Christ is just a temporary thing. Whatever they were going to face, whatever challenges lay in their future, whatever work God gave them to do, it was all about Jesus' return. It was all about the things of heaven. That's what Paul tells us, too: **“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”**

That's hard for us to do, because we haven't seen heaven yet. When life hurts, it's hard to think of the glory of heaven and say that the pain is worth it. When your job is frustrating and your marriage is in trouble and your relationship with your kids is stressed, you can't just write that stuff off. That's not what Paul was telling us to do. God tells us to be good parents and to be children who honor their parents – even care for them in their old age. God tells us to love and honor our spouse. God tells us to be good and faithful workers. So when Paul tells us to focus on the life to come, he doesn't mean that we should sell all that we own and go sit on a mountain some place and wait for Jesus to come back.

What does he mean? He means to put our faith first. He means to understand that even the most important things of this life are only temporary. And anything that comes between us and God is idol worship, even if it's something that isn't necessarily sinful by itself. Martha, the sister of Mary, just wanted to make a nice meal for Jesus. He told her that her priorities were all wrong. Hearing his word needed to come first. The good news about Jesus is the message of heaven. Taking care of our faith is setting our minds and hearts on things above. Putting the spiritual good of our kids ahead of sports practices and making money and being popular is putting the things of God first. And when any of that other stuff comes first, we sin.

Can any of us claim to be innocent? Not one. Not if we're honest. But that's the beauty of our Savior. He died and paid for all that sin. He died and paid for every time we put something ahead of God. He died and paid because our sinful hearts are determined to focus on this world and put our welfare here above everything else. Then he rose and wiped all that sin away. Every time we remember that he rose and forgave us, we are

focusing on the things above. And the power that comes from that gospel keeps us focused on God's business: on our prayer life, on our efforts to assist our congregation in its mission, on sharing our faith with others, on teaching our children to know their Savior. The only way to set your mind on things above is to focus on Jesus. Focusing on Jesus feeds our faith so that we can stay focused.

That's what makes us dead to this world. The truth is, a Christian loves Jesus more than he loves anything here. The new man does that already and he fights every day to break the old man's hold on our hearts. Be dead to this world. Put Christ first every single day. That's what God calls us to do.

So maybe today really isn't your real funeral. Ascension doesn't seem like the kind of solemn day that a funeral is. But it is a day to remember that while we live down here, we really live up there. When we are dead to the temptations and traps of this world, we live for Christ. We look forward to the day when Jesus comes back and he reveals our true life to us first of all. He will strip away all our sin and make us truly perfect in every way. When we can see our true life without anything getting in the way, everyone else will see it, too. Until that day, know that God sees you for what you really are: dead to sin and alive to Christ. Know that he will never forget that. Know that Jesus will return and reveal your true glory. Amen.