

FAREWELL AND HAIL

A Sermon delivered at St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Virginia

On the Feast of the Ascension of our Lord – June 2, 2011

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Dear watchers and waiters on the occasion of today's celebration of our Lord's ascension.

Americans are on the move and one cannot help but notice. Especially during this period of high unemployment and financial recession, people are moving to where there are jobs, restricted somewhat by the liabilities of homes that are slow to sell and a housing market that usually translates into financial loss. Others who are fortunate enough to be employed are sometimes finding that their jobs are moving to other areas with more favorable tax codes and lower wage scales. That means the composition of yours and many other neighborhoods are changing, and you find ourselves saying "Farewell" to old friends and "Hello" to new ones.

Perhaps nowhere is this migration more epitomized than in the military community where I spend the majority of my ministry. In order to deal with and formalize this situation, most military units conduct a monthly gathering known simply as a "Hail and Farewell," at which sponsored newcomers and their families are publically recognized and formally introduced, and those moving to new locations are bid farewell. Here at St. John's there is a similar system in place to welcome new members and bid safe journey to those departing to new locations.

Today, as we celebrate our Lord's Ascension we find ourselves in a similar situation, but did you notice? It is reversed. The "Farewell" comes first. The "Hail" is yet to follow. Or as the angel put it in Luke's account: *"This same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him go into heaven."*

Farewells are almost always painful and emotional events. Even the most stoic and somber frequently emulate the current Speaker of the House, and are moved to tears as the powerful emotions of separation from friends and cherished memories, combined with the uncertainties of what the future holds, become powerfully real. Curiously, we note that at Jesus' ascension farewell, this was not the case. In the last verse of today's Gospel, Luke records the reaction of his disciples and notes: *"And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God."* Isn't this a 180 degree difference from their prior reaction after the crucifixion? Remember there they huddled in fear and confusion behind locked doors, concluding that their cause was lost, their hero was dead, and their meaningless lives were about to end.

However, something intervened to reverse the sorrow, the shame, and the hopelessness of that premature farewell. That was his resurrection. Jesus' resurrection changed the scenario and appended a heart-pounding, joyous "Hail to the Chief," to replace their numbing farewell. Then, as he opened to them the full meaning of the Scriptures, they became keenly aware of the entirety and enormity of God's plan and his and their role in it. Christ's ascension for them now became the event that signaled it was about time for his work to end and for them to go to work and do their part to make the kingdom of God come so all could hail the return of their victorious Lord.

While the ascension seems like a farewell in that it removed Jesus' physical presence from that of his disciples and from us, the ascension became his victory lap, his induction into the hall of heaven, his ascension to the throne he vacated when he assumed the beggars clothes of our human race and, laying aside his power, he lived, worked, and died on our behalf.

Perhaps some of you were alive when or have since viewed film footage of the ascendance to the British throne of their current monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, in June of 1953. The royal wedding this past April gave us a feel and a taste for the pomp and splendor that accompanies such an event and demonstrates the pride and special place the monarchy has in the hearts of many its subjects.

Yet, that monarch who personifies pomp and splendor and displays of power, actually wields no power at all. She is merely a figurehead of what used to be. In contrast, the ascension of our Lord marks his reclaiming of the awesome power that was his before his incarnation and is yet to come. Paul, in our Second Lesson, struggles to describe it this way: "With the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know ...what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church" (Ephesians 1:18-22).

That should make us, like the first disciples duly proud and filled with great joy, confident that God's plan of salvation is now completed in the part Jesus, the Christ, played in it. It should also fill us with the resolve and energy to stop standing around just gazing up in the sky, but rather to focus our attention on the discipleship role we must play so we can put up the welcome sign, knowing full well that the "Farewell" we commemorate today will become the "Hail and Hello" of tomorrow when Christ comes with his mighty power as he promised. So the Ascension is like the man who was making his funeral arrangements and designated that at his committal service there would be two buglers – the first to play "Taps," and as those somber notes of farewell faded away the second bugler would play "Reveille" -- meaning it is time to get up in the morning. May the Spirit give us the will and the energy and the joy and the faith to make that happen soon! Amen