From the Bishop

*Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven… (Luke 24:50-51)*

I wonder how those disciples felt as Jesus ascended into the heavens, rising like a hot air balloon. Did they suddenly feel all alone, left to themselves, and unsure of what to do next? Or did they begin to realize the presence of Jesus in some new and different way?

“What is the Ascension?” A middle school boy asked me the question. This young inquiring mind was looking at the lines of the Apostles’ Creed. He had also been paging through the front of Evangelical Lutheran Worship and saw Ascension of our Lord named in the Easter season.

I could tell he was trying to make sense of it all. The picture of Jesus floating upward above the heads of the disciples into the clouds left him with a lot of questions. Where was Jesus going? Where is heaven? What does all this mean? I could imagine the boy trying to make sense of this as he read and learned about the planet earth and our solar system, stars in distant galaxies and an ever-expanding cosmos.

I tried to tell him the Ascension does not mean Jesus is no longer with the Church. We confess that Christ is present in bread and wine, where two or three are gathered, and in the Bible stories we read. And Jesus is as close as our immigrant neighbor and hospitalized friend.

In the Apostles’ Creed we confess “…on the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father.” Martin Luther said the right hand of God means that God is everywhere. The ascension tells us that God has confirmed Jesus as his beloved Son, fully vindicated his life and ministry. There are now no limits of time and no barriers of space barring his presence from us. The ascension is less about levitation and Jesus’ absence in earthly form. It is much more about the transformation of his presence.

Luke also tells us that just before he ascended Jesus said, “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” Jesus leaves and the Holy Spirit comes, powerfully, Luke tells us, transforming lukewarm and apathetic followers into disciples with passion and commitment. Christ goes and the Spirit comes.

Jesus’ ascension is not about his escaping the problems and the plight of people here on earth. It is more about the Risen Christ being Lord and Redeemer to people everywhere. Christ is present in the Holy Spirit he has sent, present everywhere and for everyone.

I am looking forward to our synod assembly May 19-20 about a week before Ascension Day. While we have our challenges these days, there is so much for which to be thankful. At the heart of that thanksgiving is the comfort and assurance of the presence of the Risen Christ and his life-giving Spirit.