

The Exaltation of Christ

The Apostles' Creed, Part Three

October 18, 2026

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

TURNING AROUND ON THE STAIRCASE

Last Sunday we walked down a staircase. Step by step, we followed Jesus downward. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Born of the Virgin Mary. Suffered under Pontius Pilate. Crucified. Died. Buried. Down and down and down. We gave that downward journey a theological name: the humiliation of Jesus.

Today we turn around, and we start climbing. The Creed continues: “He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.” The Church calls this the exaltation of Christ.

Let us begin where we began last week, with a definition. In His humiliation, Jesus did not cease to be God. He possessed all the power and glory of God, but for our salvation He did not always make full use of it. In His exaltation, that changes. Christ, still true God and true man, now fully exercises His divine power, majesty, and glory. That is exaltation.

So we start up the staircase. Except there is an immediate problem.

THE FIRST STEP GOES DOWN

The first step up goes down. “He descended into hell.” How in the world is that exaltation?

Let us have another quiz. When Christ descended into hell, what was He doing? A: He was suffering the final punishment for our sins. B: He was giving people who had already died another opportunity to believe and be saved. Or C: He was proclaiming His victory over Satan, death, and hell. Think about it. Which one? The answer is C.

This is one of the most misunderstood lines in the Apostles' Creed.

Christ did not descend into hell to suffer. His suffering was over.

Remember what He said from the cross.

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

John 19:30

Not "Almost finished." Not "There is one more terrible thing I have to do." Finished. The price for our sins had been paid. Christ did not descend into hell as its prisoner. He descended as its conqueror.

Peter tells us that Christ was

being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.

1 Peter 3:18–19

Scripture does not tell us everything we might like to know about precisely how this happened. But it tells us what we need to know.

Christ went there in victory. So even though the staircase seems to go down, we are taking our first step upward. The humiliation is over. Christ is victorious.

STEPS UPWARD

Now we take another step. "The third day He rose again from the dead." That sounds familiar enough. But what exactly happened on Easter morning? Did Christ simply come back to life? Other people in the Bible came back to life. Lazarus did. Jesus raised Jairus' daughter. He raised the widow's son at Nain. Is Easter simply another miracle like those? No.

Lazarus came back to the same life he had before, and eventually Lazarus died again.

Christ rose to a life over which death has no power. Saint Paul says:
We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

Romans 6:9

That is something new. And because Christ has risen, something new has begun for all who belong to Him. His resurrection is the promise of our resurrection. Our graves are not our destination. Death does not get the last word. Christ does.

Another step upward. “He ascended into heaven.” Here again, appearances can fool us. We hear that Christ ascended and naturally imagine Him going away. The disciples are standing there. Christ rises. A cloud takes Him out of their sight. And He is gone. Except He had just promised His Church:

And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:20

So which is it? Did He leave? Or is He with us? The Ascension is not Christ retiring to some distant corner of the universe. It is Christ taking His throne.

Which brings us to the next step: “He sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” What do you picture? Maybe two enormous thrones somewhere in heaven, God the Father on one and Christ beside Him on another. But “the right hand of God” is not an address. It is not a particular chair. It means power. Authority. Rule.

The Christ who was mocked as a king now reigns as King. The Christ whose hands were nailed to a cross now holds all things in those hands. The Christ who appeared powerless before Pontius Pilate now possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. Here Luther helps us. In the Large Catechism, he says that the whole Second Article can be summed up in that little word “Lord.” Jesus Christ is my Lord. He has conquered sin, death, and the devil. He has risen from the dead,

ascended into heaven, and taken His throne. Christ has not disappeared. Christ has not retired. Christ reigns.

THE TOP OF THE STAIRCASE

And now there is only one step left, and perhaps it is the one we would rather not take. “From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.” There is an old Latin phrase I have grown rather fond of: *Memento mori*. Remember that you will die. For centuries Christians used those words to remind themselves of something our culture works very hard to forget. We are going to die. And death will not be followed by nothingness. We will stand before the Judge.

Saint Paul says:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

2 Corinthians 5:10

Memento mori. Remember that we will die. Remember that we will stand before the Judge. If we stopped there, those would be terrifying words. Because we know things about ourselves that nobody else knows. We know the things we have done. The things we have said. The things we have thought. The things we should have done and did not. And Scripture says that someday we will stand before the Judge.

LOOK BACK DOWN THE STAIRS

So here we are, at the top of the staircase, and now we can finally ask the question we have been putting off. Who is the Judge? Look back down the staircase. Who is waiting for you at the top? It is Christ. Your Lord. The same One whose journey we followed last Sunday. The One who came down from heaven for you. The One who was born for you. The One who suffered under Pontius Pilate for you. The One who was

crucified for you. The One who died for you. The One who was buried for you.

And today we have followed Him upward. He descended into hell in victory. He rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven. He reigns at the right hand of the Father. And yes, He will come again to judge the living and the dead. But your Judge is your Savior. Your Judge is your Lord. The One before whom you will stand is the One who stood in your place. The One who will judge your sins is the One who carried your sins. The One seated upon the throne is the One who was nailed to the cross. Listen again to the familiar words of Luther's Small Catechism, which say why He did all of this: "that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom." You are already His. You live under Him in His kingdom. The Christ who reigns over all things is not some distant ruler whom you have never met. He is your Lord. And because Christ rose, death will not keep you. Your grave is not your destination.

CARRIED EVERY STEP

That changes *Memento mori*, doesn't it? Remember that you will die. Yes. But remember something else. Christ died too. And Christ rose. So when at last you stand before Him, you will not meet a stranger. You will see your Lord. The One who has loved you. The One who redeemed you. The One who forgave you. The One who has carried you every step of the way.

That is how we live in His kingdom: not looking over our shoulders for a Judge, but looking up to a Lord. We confess our sins, we hear His forgiveness, and we serve our neighbors, because the verdict has already been spoken over us in Christ. When I remember that I will die, I remember also whose I am. So do you.

Last Sunday we followed Jesus down. Today we followed Christ up. And someday He will raise you up with Him. Amen.

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