

The Ascension of Our Lord

“Up through Endless Ranks of Angels” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #491)

I have a faint memory from when I was growing up Lutheran in St. Louis. I can’t remember if it was confirmation class, or parochial school, or Sunday morning in the narthex. The setting blurs.

It was the day that I met Jary Vajda. I was too young to really know who I was meeting. The meeting has only become valuable to me in my faint memory of it, after his passing, now that I truly know his gift for words in rhythm. If I only knew then what I know now, I would have asked him questions about words, about their music, about how they resonate the Word.

I suspect something of that kind of nostalgia nagged the back of the mind of the disciples as they stood on the soil of Bethany, the space in the center of their circle still vacant and empty. If only they knew then what they know now, the questions they would ask. I think this is a typical feeling on Ascension Day, a kind of nostalgia.

But Maestro Vajda wants to take us on a different journey. Notice the perspective he sets up in the first verse. We are not the disciples looking up. We see through the eyes of our ascended Lord: “Cries of triumph in His ears, . . . Christ looks down upon His faithful.” The effect is to bring us into an eternal present moment. The “Cries of triumph” aren’t merely the shouts of the angels as the resurrected Christ rises through their midst. Our voices—even as we sing this very song—mix with their echoes. We stand in the same choir.

The hymn then proceeds to narrate exactly what it is that makes such an eternal victory worth celebrating. “Death-destroying, life-restoring, / Proven equal to our need”—vintage Vajda wordsmithing—we rehearse the work of God in Christ at the center of history, with its exuberant exchange: “Flesh that for our world was wounded, / Living, for the wounded plead!” Likewise, we anticipate the Spirit of Pentecost—“Send Your Spirit, promised guide”—as we now stand at the threshold between festive and ordinary time. Thus we end in doxology, standing to invoke the Three in One, giving praise by repeating the only word that can name our awe: “Alleluia, alleluia!”

It is only then that we see how far Maestro Vajda has brought us. We too have ascended “through endless ranks of angels . . . to breathe the Spirit’s grace . . . to see the Father’s face . . . to feel the Son’s embrace.” And it is a full-bodied flight into joy, where we are welcomed “as You were welcomed.” This is the joy of the Ascension, not that he has left us behind, but that he brings us to where he is—an eternal present moment—in words that resonate the Word made flesh, in a table set with the bread of life.

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Up through endless ranks of angels,
Cries of triumph in his ears,
To his heav'nly throne ascending,
Having vanquished all their fears,
Christ looks down upon his faithful,
Leaving them in happy tears.

Death-destroying, life-restoring,
Proven Equal to our need,
Now for us before the Father
As our brother intercede;
Flesh that for our world was wounded,
Living, for the wounded plead!

To our lives of wanton wandering
Send your promised Spirit-Guide;
Through our lives of fear and failure
With your pow'r and love abide:
Welcome us, as you were welcomed,
To an endless Eastertide.

Alleluia, alleluia,
Oh, to breathe the Spirit's grace!
Alleluia, alleluia,
Oh, to see the Father's face!
Alleluia, alleluia,
Oh, to feel the Son's embrace!

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Tune: ASCENDED TRIUMPH Henry V. Gerike

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]