

CALL TO WORSHIP:

“Men of Galilee,” they said,
“Why are you standing here looking into the sky?
This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven,
will come back
in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”
Let us worship God.

(Acts 1.11)

HYMN: Hail the day that sees Christ rise!

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty and holy God:

We come into your presence today to celebrate the ascension of Jesus and his enthronement in heaven. And so we acknowledge him, not only as teacher and healer, but also as Savior and Lord — the one whose authority supersedes all other authority in the world.

As we do so, however, we confess that we have not always acknowledged his authority in our lives. So often, we go along with the way of the world, and fail to put his teaching into practice. We give in to our impulses, rather than practising self-discipline.

In your mercy, forgive us, we pray.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, help us once again to turn away from sin, and to submit ourselves more and more fully to Jesus’ authority as head of the church, his body, and ruler of the world.

We pray in the name of our crucified Savior and our risen and ascended Lord; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

THE LORD’S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*Jesus Christ gave himself for us,
to redeem us from all sin,
and to purify for himself a people of his own
who are eager to do what is good.*

(Titus 2.14)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **First Reading:** Acts 1.1-14 - The ascension of Jesus

In this reading, Jesus leaves his disciples and returns to heaven, forty days after his resurrection — an event we call his “ascension”.

- **Psalm:** Psalm 47 - “Clap your hands, all you nations!”

Psalm 47 is an enthronement psalm — a psalm of praise that celebrates God’s kingship; in this case, his kingship over the whole earth, not just Israel.

Psalm 47 is the traditional psalm for Ascension Day, because Ascension Day celebrates *Jesus’* enthronement in heaven.

- **Letter Reading:** Ephesians 1.15-23 - Seated at the right hand of God

Paul begins this passage by expressing his gratitude for the people he’s writing to, as he normally does at the beginning of his letters.

He then goes off on a bit of a tangent, and ends up talking about Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

- **Gospel Reading:** Luke 24.44-53 - The ascension of Jesus

This reading is a briefer account of Jesus’ ascension than the one found in Acts.

It begins with Jesus speaking to his disciples when he appears to them after his resurrection, on the evening of that same day.

SERMON: “Moving On”

When I was a kid attending Church School, it seemed as though the period between Easter Sunday and the end of June was usually a time in which we left the stories of Jesus behind, and studied stories in the Book of Acts instead. As I see it today, that’s a quite logical way to plan the stories that kids in Church School should learn in a given year. But as a kid, I just didn’t like the stories in Acts as much as the stories in the Gospels. Why not? Because Jesus was no longer there. To me, it felt like things just weren’t the same without him.

Well, today we commemorate the event in which Jesus left his disciples, and returned to heaven — the event that we refer to as his “ascension”. Actually, we’re three days late in doing so, because “Ascension Day” itself was this past Thursday.

Ascension Day passes pretty much unnoticed each year, even in the church. This is partly because it falls on a weekday, and partly because, for some reason, we just don’t give as much attention to Jesus’ ascension as we do to other significant moments in his life — particularly his birth, which we celebrate on Christmas Day, and his resurrection, which we celebrate on Easter Sunday.

The ascension of Jesus, of course, marked the end of his time on earth. Just as Christmas Day commemorates his coming into the world, Ascension Day commemorates his departure. Is Je-

Jesus still in the world today? No, he is not. This is precisely the point of the ascension. Jesus has moved on. He has returned to his home in heaven. Christmas Day and Ascension Day remind us that Jesus' time on earth had both a definite beginning and a definite end.

Although the New Testament contains several *references* to Jesus' ascension, and several references to his exaltation in heaven, there are only three actual *accounts* of his ascension. The shortest of them is found in the Appendix to the Gospel of Mark. All it says is, *After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven, and he sat at the right hand of God* (Mark 16.19). That's it; just a single verse.

The Gospel of Matthew has no account of the ascension at all; rather it ends abruptly on a mountain in Galilee, with Jesus' so-called "Great Commission" to his disciples. The Gospel of John also has no account of Jesus' ascension, even though both Jesus and John himself mention his impending ascension a number of times in the final few chapters. Rather, John's Gospel ends with one final appearance of the risen Jesus to the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

The other two accounts are found in two of today's scripture readings — one at the end of the Gospel of Luke and the other at the beginning of the Book of Acts. However, even though both books were written by the same person, there are some differences between those two accounts.

The most significant difference has to do with *when* the ascension took place. The account in Luke's Gospel gives the impression that Jesus ascended to heaven almost immediately after his resurrection, on the evening of the very same day. By contrast, the account in Acts clearly states that Jesus continued to appear to the disciples over a period of forty days after his resurrection before returning to heaven. It's puzzling that two accounts written by the same person should have such a significant discrepancy, but there's no easy way to resolve this difference. The church has obviously chosen to give preference to the account in Acts in this regard, for long ago, it chose to commemorate Jesus' ascension not on Easter Sunday, but on the fortieth day of the Easter Season — which is always the Thursday after the sixth Sunday of Easter.

Like the one-verse account in the Appendix to Mark, the accounts in Luke and Acts both speak of Jesus' "being taken up" to heaven, rather than "ascending" to heaven. This passive form of the verb implies, of course that Jesus' ascension was the Father's doing, not Jesus' own doing.

Of course, the way the ascension is depicted would've made more sense to a First-Century audience than it does to us, because of our different understandings of the structure of the universe. A Twenty-first-Century person hearing this story for the first time might very well ask, "Where did Jesus actually go when he floated up into the sky? Did he go out into space?" A First-Century person, on the other hand, believing that heaven was just above the sky, would've said that, in order to get there, Jesus would obviously *have* to go "up".

Of course, the fact that Jesus went to heaven doesn't mean that he died a second time. Rather, he went to heaven alive. Having been raised from death, he would never die again. The

ascension simply means that he moved from one place to another. He is still in heaven today, and he is still very much alive.

A less significant difference between the two accounts is the fact that the appearance of the *two men dressed in white* (Acts 1.10) happens only in the Acts account. The fact that they're dressed in white implies, of course, that they are angels. Indeed, they remind us of the *two men in dazzling clothes* who appeared to the women at Jesus' empty tomb on Easter morning (Luke 24.4). Like *those* two angels, the angels in the Acts account interpret what has just happened — that Jesus has been “taken” into heaven. In addition, they promise that he will come back in the same way. So, in this regard, the ascension points ahead to Jesus' second coming.

Just as the ascension was an event in which *Jesus* “moved on”, it was also an event in which the *disciples* “moved on”. Having spent as much as three years in Jesus' company, listening to his teaching and witnessing his actions, they were now poised to continue his work in his absence.

In both the Luke and Acts accounts, then, the ascension is preceded by some final *teaching* by Jesus. In Luke's account, it sounds as if Jesus gives them a “crash course” on the Old Testament. Luke says, *[Jesus] opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures* (Luke 24.45). On the other hand, in the Acts account, the teaching is spread over the forty-day period between Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Luke says, *[Jesus] appeared to them over a period of forty days, and spoke about the kingdom of God* (Acts 1.3). Since the kingdom of God was a major theme in Jesus' teaching during his ministry, it appears that he used this forty-day period to review and build on what he had already taught them.

Both accounts then also contain a commissioning by Jesus — that is, a sending of the disciples, with instructions. In Luke, Jesus says, *This is what is written [in the scriptures]: The Messiah will suffer, and rise from the dead on the third day; and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things* (Luke 24.46-48). In the Acts account, Jesus says, *You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* (Acts 1.8b).

Notice that in both accounts, Jesus uses the word “witnesses”. As witnesses of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection, their task will be to testify about everything they have seen and heard — not only Jesus' teachings and miracles, but also the facts surrounding his death and resurrection. Notice also, that in both accounts, the disciples' proclamation is to begin in Jerusalem, and to spread outward from there, to reach “all nations”, or “the ends of the earth”. The disciples thus become “apostles”. The word “disciple” means a learner or apprentice; the word “apostle” means someone who has been sent out.

One final instruction that Jesus gives the disciples is to wait to receive the Holy Spirit, who will guide, equip, and empower them to accomplish the task that Jesus is giving them. In Luke, he tells them, *I am going to send you what my Father has promised, but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high* (Luke 24.49). In Acts, Jesus says, *Do not leave Jerusa-*

lem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. ... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you (Acts 1.4b-5, 8a).

In this regard, then, Jesus' ascension points ahead to the giving of the Holy Spirit, which, according to the Book of Acts, would happen just ten days later, during the festival of Pentecost.

How did the disciples feel about Jesus' departure? I imagine that if I had been there, I would've felt much the same way I did as a kid in Church School, when we shifted from reading stories from the Gospels to reading stories from Acts — a feeling of loss, and a feeling that things just wouldn't be the same without Jesus. Somewhat surprisingly, though, the account in Luke says the opposite — that the disciples *returned to Jerusalem with great joy* (Luke 24.52).

In the Acts account, too, the disciples return to Jerusalem, and then Luke takes the time to tell us who was in the group of disciples and followers in those early days. Significantly, the group includes *Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers* (Acts 1.14). I say “significantly” because they don't seem to have had much involvement in Jesus' ministry — not in any of the Gospel accounts. The verse immediately following today's reading says that the whole group numbered *about a hundred and twenty* (Acts 1.15), so obviously, it was a much larger group than just the Eleven themselves.

The followers of Jesus thus await the coming of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus has promised. They stay in Jerusalem, they stick together, and they spend a lot of time in prayer. Again, just as Jesus himself has “moved on” by returning to heaven, they too are “moving on” as they prepare for the task that Jesus has given them.

Today's reading from the Letters gives us a different perspective on Jesus' ascension from what we find in the accounts in Luke and Acts. Rather than focusing on the disciples, it focuses on Jesus himself.

When he speaks of God's power in this passage from Ephesians, Paul ends up going off on a tangent, which is not uncommon in his writings. It's that “tangent” that's of interest to us on Ascension Sunday, rather than what he says in the first four-and-a-half verses of the passage. In this tangent, Paul speaks of the power by which God *raised [Jesus] from the dead, and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms* (Ephesians 1.19b-20), to use his own words. By this, he refers, of course, to both Jesus' resurrection and his ascension.

Like other New Testament writers, Paul sees Jesus' ascension as his exaltation to a position of tremendous authority and power. He sees the ascended Jesus pretty much as the “master of the universe”, as we might say today. In his own words, Jesus' position is *far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that can be invoked, not only in the present age, but also in the age to come* (Ephesians 1.22).

What Paul says about Jesus here is actually quite similar to what Old Testament writers say about Israel's God being superior to the gods of all other nations. Psalm 96, for example, says,

in part,

*Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise;
he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.* (Psalm 96.4-5)

This, then, is a very different picture of Jesus than the one that normally comes to mind when we read the stories of his life and ministry, isn't it? This is Jesus as he was before he came into the world in human form. This is the glorious and majestic Jesus whom the disciples Peter, James, and John saw a brief glimpse of in his transfiguration.

Finally, Paul speaks of Jesus as the head of the church, his body (Ephesians 1.22-23), an image that he returns to later in this same letter, in Chapter 4. Again, the image is one of authority — specifically his authority over the church. This is why, in the Presbyterian Church, we refer to Jesus as “the only King and Head of the church”. If Jesus was an authority figure during his ministry, as he certainly was, his ascension shows that he is a person of much greater authority than even his closest disciples would have realized at the time.

“Moving on” — in the ascension, Jesus and the disciples both “move on”, so to speak — on to the next stage in God's unfolding plan. Jesus returns to his position of authority and power in heaven, while the disciples prepare to become “apostles”. The stage is set for the next great event: the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the beginning of the church's ministry. That ministry will be undertaken by ordinary human beings, although human beings guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

HYMN: The head that once was crowned with thorns ...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

God of grace:

As we celebrate the ascension of Jesus today, we give you thanks that he accomplished and completed the task for which you had sent him into the world. We thank you for his ministry of teaching and healing, for his sacrificial death on the cross, and for his resurrection to new life.

We thank you that, in taking him up to heaven, you exalted him to the highest place, and gave him titles that outrank all other titles in the world: “Lord” and “Messiah”. We thank you that he rules in heaven together with you and the Holy Spirit — one God — for ever, even though his rule has not yet been fully realized in the world. Help us, and Christians everywhere, as those who believe in him and love him, to acknowledge his rule in our lives, to submit to his authority, and to strive, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to live by his teaching.

We offer up our prayers for members of our congregation and others close to us who find themselves in difficult and stressful situations, in particular, those whom we name before you

now: _____. God of compassion: You know each person's situation and needs, and we pray that you would meet their needs, and grant them your guidance, strength, and encouragement.

As we pray for people in positions of authority today, we pray for the members of our Presbytery, which will meet by Zoom this week. Help them to discern the Holy Spirit's leading in the decisions they need to make, we pray, and give them vision for tasks that the Presbytery needs to work at in the coming year. Similarly, we pray for those who are preparing for this year's meeting of the General Assembly, which also will take place by Zoom. Grant your guidance and blessing to the commissioners from across the country, as they read and digest the various reports, and prepare to discuss and vote on their recommendations; and also as they seek to get accustomed to the technology that they will be using.

We pray about the latest flare-up of hostilities in Israel and Palestine. We thank you for those who are working behind the scenes to reduce tensions, and to work out a cease-fire; and we pray that you would guide and bless their efforts. We ask your blessing on people on both sides who have lost loved ones, homes, or workplaces, and we pray that they may receive the support and assistance they need. Especially, we pray for a new willingness to resolve the underlying causes of the tensions that led to this outbreak, and to engage in serious negotiations to resolve those issues.

We pray for people who are dealing with flooding in the Northwest Territories, and pray that they may receive the assistance they need both in evacuating and in dealing with damage to their homes and possessions.

We continue to pray about the pandemic. We give thanks that additional financial assistance is being made available by the provincial government. We pray that the increased restrictions imposed in various places across the country may result in decreasing numbers of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths.

We pray for the people of India in particular, as they go through this crisis with a much larger population than ours, and with inadequate resources. We give thanks for assistance that has been provided by the international community so far, and we pray that still more assistance may be forthcoming.

We pray again for teachers and students, who are enduring their own particular challenges in coping with the pandemic, that you would bless and strengthen them. And we pray especially for your blessing on those who have been forced to go back to online education, as they strive to adapt to the challenges of that format.

We pray also that you would bless the effort to get accurate information about COVID-19 and the various vaccines out to everyone, so that people may not be misled by false information.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God, and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord, the only King and Head of the church. Amen.

OFFERING

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

Great and mighty God:

We praise you that Jesus has ascended to rule at your right hand. We rejoice before his throne of power and peace. We thank you that he alone is Lord of our lives.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, then, give us freedom to love with his love, and to embrace the world with his compassion.

Accept, then, we pray, our *offerings*, as well as the offering of our *lives*, so that we may obey your command to serve others with the same *love* that Jesus has shown toward us.

We pray in his name. Amen.

HYMN: Hallelujah! Sing to Jesus!

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to return to your daily service for God

as disciples of Jesus in our own time and place.

And may God bless you:

May he give you his guidance and inspiration,

and may he strengthen and encourage you as you serve him;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.