

May 21, 2023. Rev. Kathryn McGinnis

Let us pray. Lord, open our eyes; open our hearts. May we hear your Word read and proclaimed so that our lives and our witness will be strengthened. Amen.

Our scripture this morning is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24, verses 44-53. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy,⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Today is the last Sunday of the season of Easter. The Easter season begins with Christ’s resurrection and spans 7 weeks, ending with Pentecost, which we will celebrate next week.

The season of Easter always seems to surprise me each year. I think it’s because we can easily forget that Easter is a whole season. It’s 50 days, not just a single day. Not just that triumphant Easter morning.

It’s an incredible, exhausting build up to that Easter morning. We go through 40 days of preparation in Lent, and then take the long journey to the cross through Holy Week.

Our emotions and energies are, understandably, worn thin. But then we get to bask in the joy on that Easter morning.

And after receiving that joy, the temptation is to move on, rest, and retreat into the rhythm of our everyday lives. But Easter season doesn’t let us do that. Easter has us pause, wait, and sit in resurrection.

Easter challenges us to ask –

What does it mean to live in Easter?

What is resurrection?

What does resurrection mean beyond the eternal life that is to come?

What does resurrection mean for us here and now?

What does it mean that our God has defeated death, but violence and chaos remain abundant around us?

And, perhaps the question of today, why did Christ leave us?

When Easter is just a day; we don't have to ask those questions. When easter is just a day, we get joy and then get to move on.

But those questions are important – resurrection is the foundation of our faith – we need the season of Easter to challenge what it means.

Today, on this last Sunday of Easter, we celebrate the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. 40 days after his resurrection, Christ ascends into heaven, and thus, his earthly ministry ends. He has completed that which he set out to do.

There is certainly joy in the culmination of Christ's time here on Earth.

It's because of the incarnate god's life and journey into death and resurrection, that we too, journey through life and into death and resurrection. It's because of the incarnate god's ministry on earth that we come to know God face to face, and it turn recognize what it means for us to made in God's image.

But the point of ascension is that Christ's earthly journey does end. And he leaves us.

Now, we know next week at Pentecost, the Holy spirit will come down among us and emboldens us to begin a new journey, spreading the gospel as Christ's body here on earth, but today we are left in this liminal space in between. A time without Christ's earthly presence, and before the birth of the holy Spirit.

And in this liminal space, we have one last chance to bask in Christ's glory before the real work begins. And we have one last chance to contemplate and challenge resurrection before we go out and bear witness to it among the world.

The story of the ascension in the gospel of Luke is a rather remarkable when taken in the context of Luke's Gospel. Traditionally, we acknowledge that Christ ascended into Heaven 40 days after the resurrection, as told in the account of Christ's ascension in the book of Acts. But in Luke's gospel, he presents Christ resurrection and ascension as one seamless narrative.

He begins with the story of the women and the empty tomb, and Luke tells us later that same day two of Jesus' followers began the road to Emmaus, where they encountered Christ. When they discovered it was Christ who walked along the road with them and broke bread with them, Luke then tells us that they left that same hour, and went back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples and Jesus' followers what had happened.

And when they reach Jerusalem and began to tell their tale, Luke tells us that Jesus appeared again, right there, stood among them all.

He showed them his hands and his feet and ate with them – and opened their minds to understand the scriptures.

Then Christ leads them all out to Bethany, where he ascends into heaven. And after the disciples return to Jerusalem, Luke's gospel ends with them worshipping God in the temple with great joy.

What a journey that must have been for Christ's followers. What they must process in the span of a day or two, we get 7 weeks.

We're left wondering what did they learn?

When Christ opened their minds to understand scripture, what did they see that they did not before?

While we may not know for sure, we can take comfort that what they did learn was enough. It was enough for them to take the gospel and spread it throughout the world and watch it take root and begin a journey that we are still on today.

But just like hearing the story of the resurrection to the ascension in Luke's gospel, our journey, too, is rather exhausting.

Jesus' earthly work is completed. His time on earth reached its fulfillment, but the journey of the church remains. It is a journey that began over 2,000 years ago and will not end in our lifetime.

Christ's time had an end, but our collective journey remains. That's the challenge of ascension. Why did Christ's time reach fulfillment, yet the struggle of our time, of trying to bring God's kingdom of love, justice, mercy, and grace here on earth stretches into thousands of years.

Why did Christ's time end – yet the world around us is overwhelmed in suffering, in violence, and in injustice.

What is it about his time, that was worthy to leave us?

We, all of us, are made in God's image. That image is no less than the word that made flesh.

Our God is a God who longs for relationship.

When Christ, fully human, fully God, was born into the world at Christmas, God's plan to be reunited with humanity was fulfilled.

The word made flesh's death and resurrection assured that our relationship did not end with death. And thus, the ascension is that moment that relationship comes to fruition – for now there is one of us where we all shall be.

For in his ascension, we see the ascent of all humanity. A sign that God accepts us and welcomes us in God's kingdom.

With the word made flesh's ascension, now at every point along the journey of our lives and what is to come, we are where we intended to be. Where we are welcomed and loved.

You see, the ascension is the culmination of the gospel story. It has fulfilled that which it set out to do – to restore, strengthen, and bring to fruition the relationship between humanity and its creator.

And now the fulfillment for which humanity was created can begin.

It's what we learn about resurrection in the season of easter that sustains us along the way. Along that journey which began long before us and will continue long after.

When Christ was resurrected – his resurrected body bore the wounds of the violence of humanity. There were holes still in his hands and feet. His body still needed nourishment. He ate with the disciples. Even in resurrection, the imperfections of what it is to be human remain. Those imperfections are part of the image in which we are created. Christ's earthly ministry was complete even with those wounds. It was with wounded hands that he blessed the disciples as he ascended.

The journey that we are on – that Pentecost births into the world – is the journey of our lives – the journey that connects us to all who came before us, and all who will come after us. The gift of ascension is to know that now the word made flesh lived among us, died among us, rose among us, and went home bringing our humanity with him.

The season of Easter surprises me each and every year because of the vulnerability it takes to realize that all that we are does not change in resurrection. Even when Christ's earthly work is done – we are left with wounds – yet the holy spirit is birthed through them – and our work begins. Just as we are. On this last Sunday of Easter, for that we give thanks.