

May 16, 2021 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray,

Open our hearts and our minds, O Lord, that above all the many voices that swirl around us we might clearly hear your word to us today; and in the hearing of your word, may our lives might be transformed by this encounter with you. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24, verses 44 through 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[a] is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, **47** 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.

Our scripture for this morning, this story from the gospel of Luke marks ascension day - where Christ ascends up into heaven 40 days after the resurrection. The ascension of the Lord may feel a bit foreign to us, in 2021.

It almost feels silly to think about Jesus in human form rising into the sky and disappearing into the heavens.

It is a description that almost seems to invoke the imagery of Glinda the good witch descending from the sky in a bubble and appearing to Dorothy.

But for the disciples, those witnessing the ascension, perhaps it wouldn't seem too strange.

Before he ascends Christ opens the disciples minds to understand that the Old Testament scriptures must be fulfilled.

In the Old testament, the skies are the place of God's throne, up above it all.

Jesus ascending to the sky fulfills the scriptures and enthrones Christ as the divine king of the whole world.

In the greco-roman world of the time, too, the Greek and Roman Gods lived up in the sky, on Mount Olympus.

They would come down to Earth and cause havoc in mankind and then ascend back up to the sky to rule from above.

Perhaps it would have made perfect sense to Jesus' followers that he would ascend to the sky, his earthly mission fulfilled. But what's important about ascension day is not how it happens or what it looks like when Christ rises up to the heavens, but what it means for us - down below. The Ascension happens in a time of transition.

Christ has gone up into heaven, leaving his followers behind. The Holy spirit is coming, but has not arrived. Pentecost still a week away - leaving this time of transition.

Perhaps, we here today, both in the sanctuary and in our homes, know this reality all too well. We are in a time of transition.

Most of us are vaccinated. Even youth are starting to get vaccinated.

We don't have to wear masks outside. We can eat indoors in a restaurant.

It's like we can see clearly the light at the end of the tunnel that is covid - we are almost through it. Almost to the light. But not yet.

We are here, some of us, in person today - the first time in over a year - but we cannot hug, or sing, we must wear masks. No we are not out of the tunnel just yet - we are in a time of transition.

And on the ascension day we learn the importance of transition.

How it speaks to us theologically. How it shapes our faith and our community.

As David Cunningham writes, "Ascension Day is not so much about the physical act of ascension, or even about the reuniting of the incarnate word with the unbegotten source. Rather, it is concerned with the divine act of *making space* so that the mission of the church can begin. So long as God was in the world in human form, all eyes and hearts were fixed there. Jesus' ascension makes space for the disciples to turn their gaze upon the world" where the gospel is to be spread.

With Christ ascending to the heavens the disciples are free to begin to take what Christ has taught them and go out from Jerusalem into the world,

spreading goodness and mercy, preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins.

And they do this, knowing the spirit is with them, in their midst, guiding them.

But Christ has to make space, gracefully step aside, to let the Holy spirit's work begin.

In the triune relationship - creator redeemer sustainer, they, each "persons" of the trinity, make space for one another.

They do so assured in the fact that when one steps back, another steps forward.

Rowan Williams describes it best when he writes, "each of the three divine "persons" seeks not to gain pride of place or to assert hierarchical dominion over the others, but to *give place*, to the others, so that they too can most fully be what they are."

And in doing so - the triune God models for us the true nature of community, of relationships.

Where we thrive and prosper together when we make space for each other to be fully what we are.

Where we see the value in our differences and use them to better ourselves and each other.

Perhaps in this time of transition - where it seems like we are together but still apart, through the guide of the ascension, we are able to see this as a time for making space.

Making space to grieve the normal days, the normal worship, the normal country we knew before.

Those days are gone.

In doing so, we make space for the possibilities of life after this pandemic to reach fulfillment.

For this world, our country, this community - even our church to become fully what we are. What we can be.

Just as the disciples no longer have their eyes fixed on Christ and can turn their gaze to the world - we too, are right in the middle of turning gaze.

We no longer stare solely at the past, a normalcy that was comfortable.

Instead we look towards the future, taking all that we have witnessed and learned these past 14 months with us.

As we sit in these pews or in our homes knowing the end is so near - what will take with us as we turn our gaze forward? What have we learned?

What has been stamped upon our hearts that was not there before? What have we learned about ourselves this past year that only appeared because gave place to it?

Have we seen our capacity for change grow, our courage to face the truth - no matter how dark - take center stage?

This time of transition is precious time.

Time that we were not given 14 months ago when the world shut down over night.

We get that time now. To process and grieve and mourn and build joy for what is to come.

Transition often invokes fear and anxiety - but it does not have to be a fearful or anxious time.

As Jesus ascended up into heaven he was in the middle of blessing his disciples.

A blessing he did not finish before he was carried up into heaven. A blessing without end. A blessing that the disciples carried with them to Jerusalem and out into the world.

And the gospel of Luke ends there. With an endless blessing.

So, as we honor Christ's ascension today - try not to get lost in the imagery of Jesus rising in the sky - imagery that might feel foreign to us.

The importance of the ascension lies not in what it looked like or how exactly it happened - no, the importance of the ascension lies in what it teaches us about the triune God.

A god who makes space. May we, in this time of transition, follow in Christ's footsteps and make space.

For each other, for ourselves, for this next chapter, to all be fully what we are. And if doing some brings up fear or anxiety, may we turn with joy to Christ's endless blessing. A blessing that is still with us - right here in our midst.

Thanks be to God. Amen.