

Welcome, Announcements, and Land Acknowledgement

As we come to worship in Jesus' name we acknowledge with gratitude and respect the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather. We commit ourselves to just and respectful relationships within our congregation and our neighborhood.

➤ *Don't be afraid (repeat)*

Call to Worship [from Psalm 47]

Everyone clap your hands!

Shout to God with joy!

The Lord Most High is King of all the earth.

Everyone stands in awe of God.

God ascends the throne with a joyful cry.

Sing praise to God with joyful voice!

We all belong to God, let everyone one rejoice.

➤ *Rejoice, the Lord is King*

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† Gathering Prayer / The Lord's Prayer / Words of Hope

Creator, Saviour and empowering Spirit – cleanse our hearts – unfetter our lips – set free the joy that too often subsides behind familiarity or is forced into a corner by our reticence and formality. Let us worship you today with unabashed delight!

We confess that we have strayed from the way of Jesus. We seek forgiveness for the times when we place too much value on social status, power and wealth. We ask your mercy for the times when we try to measure our faith by worldly standards of success.

We beg that you, O God, would continue to forgive our often-foolish ambitions and sometimes dishonourable methods of dealing with the pressures of life. By your Holy Spirit, bring us to our senses – re-establish our souls in the fields of your grace – banish forever any shame that could eat away your peace within us.

We boldly pray together with Jesus ...Our Father, who art in heaven – hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come – thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen

Friends we are redeemed and forgiven through Christ whom God raised from the dead. Hear and trust the gospel – it is forever yours! Praise God!

† Prayer for Understanding

Open our minds to understand the scriptures, O God, just as you opened the minds of the disciples. Bless us as you blessed them. May we continually worship you with great joy, seeking the wisdom of your Holy Word. Amen

Scripture **Acts 1: 1-11** [NT 118]

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Ephesians 1: 15-23 [NT 192]

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has

put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Luke 24: 44-53 [NT 91]

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."

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. 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."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.

While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message

Planning ahead is, as most of you know, the way I operate – but sometimes, like this week that can get me into trouble. Having prepared my message for you in advance, do I change everything to address in some way the tragedy that occurred in Texas during the week? As I reflected on it, I decided that since the message is about perspective, perhaps it would stand. The readings from Luke and Acts approach the ascension of Jesus from different perspectives – and challenge us to live our lives from a Jesus perspective – taking a worldview that loves God and one another.

In all the years that I taught school I don't know that I ever concerned myself with the idea that someone would shoot me or the children in my care. I don't know that I ever contemplated the idea that one of my students would be so mentally ill that they would one day open fire on anyone – let alone innocents in a supposed place of safety. I think my perspective has changed.

I read a comment from a colleague this week – seminary never fully prepared me to deal with gun violence and mass shooting. They wondered – like me – how they should "deal with it". Someone responded that if they lived where the event occurred they should perhaps take a largely pastoral approach, offering comfort, but if they were further removed from the incident they might want to come at it from a justice perspective – expressing outrage, frustration, incredulity – ranting about a culture that promotes violence and the lack of political will or compassionate courage to change it.

It is about perspective – how to we experience and interpret the world in which we live and how do we understand how we out to live faithfully in it?

The message I have prepared looks at that – at how the gospel writers each have their own point of view on the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. How Luke – the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts – offers two points of view from which to think about how the disciples can respond to the ascension of Jesus – is it an end or a beginning...?

Have you ever compared the endings of the gospels? Today we read the final verses of Luke which talk about the ascension – about Jesus appearing to the disciples in Jerusalem following their Emmaus Road experience and then being carried up to heaven. In this account Jesus makes sure they see him as physical presence – eating fish with the disciples and inviting them to touch him. Jesus reminds them of his teaching, prepares them to receive the power of the Holy Spirit – they walk to Bethany, he blesses them and then he sort-of drifts away. For Luke, the ascension is the last line of the Jesus story – where his gospel ends.

Not so in Matthew who has the disciples meet with Jesus in Galilee – quite soon after the crucifixion/resurrection – they worshipped him and some doubted. Jesus commissioned them – and by proxy all of us – to share the good news, make disciples and baptize.

John's gospel has a whole series of post-resurrection sightings and stories that culminate on the beach by the Sea of Tiberius where Jesus helps the disciples haul in a spectacular catch of fish. They have bread and fish together for breakfast – are instructed by Jesus to feed and care for “his sheep” – to continue to follow him.

In Mark there seem to be choices but let's stick with the first ending which happens right at the tomb when the women came to anoint the body. They are told not to be afraid – that Jesus will meet his disciples in Galilee, however they flee the tomb in terror and amazement – saying nothing to anyone. The End!

Each account makes sense in the context of the particular gospel. Their variations serve to remind us that each author is sharing the story of Jesus in his own way – that their accounts are neither fact nor fiction, they are good news. It is Luke's telling that confronts us today – a strange account of Jesus' rapture into heaven that seems quite out of character for the normally grounded and worldly Luke.

Was the ascension a literal event – was it the only way Luke could imagine Jesus' departure? After all, you couldn't have the Christ riding into the sunset – Lone Ranger style – with bystanders asking, “Who was that masked man?” You couldn't have Jesus die at the end of the story – he had already died once and defeated death. And so Jesus floats upward – presumably toward heaven.

In our world today, many of us have trouble deciding which way is up from time to time! The idea that Jesus ascended to a God “up there” is pretty far out. Some people still live in a three-story universe – heaven above, earth between, hell below – but I don’t think anyone believes that if you get into a spaceship and fly far enough, you’ll find a place called “heaven.”

And not every culture shares the same world view. I learned that when European missionaries came to share the gospel with indigenous people in what is now South Africa, they were faced with a theological conundrum.

Apparently, the indigenous people believed that “God” lived in the ground. Caves and holes were sacred spaces which is why they were adorned with lithographs which in turn were animated by flickering fire in the caves. To this day the traditions of Africa see their beloved dead buried in the *kraal*. When an African is facing life’s challenges, a sacred ritual is to return to the kraal at one’s home and pour the froth of traditional beer into the earth before asking advice of the ancients who are buried there amongst their cattle.

The European missionaries came teaching that God lived in the sky – that there was a place called hell deep in the earth. Imagine the effect on those indigenous people! This preaching literally turned the psyche of those people around from the God of the deep to the God of the sky, creating a profound tear in the soul of the indigenous people who were already profoundly theistic.

At the time those missionaries did not have the insight to examine how they had come to believe in a God of the sky. Now we recognize that when people thought the world was flat it was easy to point to where God lived – God was up – beyond the dome keeping chaos from our earthly home. Bringing that kind of cosmology to the events of Jesus’ death, resurrection and re-assimilation into God it was easy to speak of ascension – of Jesus withdrawing and being carried up to heaven – back to God – beyond the dome of the earth perched precariously over the pit of hell.

Nowadays it is more challenging – we know the earth is one planet in our solar system – that we exist in space and in space there is no “up” or “down”. So what are we to make of Luke’s description? Of course, it’s not out of the question that Jesus defied gravity, but is that the real point? Is Luke’s message concerning Jesus about gravity or spirituality – geography or vocation?

Whichever way you look at, it the Jesus story in Luke’s gospel comes to an end, but if you turn to Acts, Luke tells a somewhat different tale. Here the ascension of Jesus is not the end of the story – it is the beginning of another story – the story of the church.

In Acts, Luke resumes his more worldly style – emphasizing what needs to be done now. The disciples quiz Jesus about the fulfillment of history, the restoration of Israel. And Jesus’ response is purposely vague: *“It is not for you to know the times or periods...”* Rather, we are to await the coming of God’s Spirit and the missional power that comes from encountering the Holy. The implication is that what they are to do – the business of the fledgling church – will not be to

indulge in speculation about the distant future – the end times, but to get about the continuing work of the kingdom.

Now that we have a third millennium cosmology, to speak of Jesus ascending is strange – where is up from a ball? What if the indigenous Africans were correct and Jesus came from God who lives in the earth? He would then have descended rather than ascended – back into the earth from which he came. How might that simple change of orientation transform our world history? Would the earth be groaning as she is now? Would we have used and abused the earth as we have?

Jesus is lifted up, and the disciples stand gazing into the heavens until two men in white robes ask, “...*why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*” The implication is, *don't just stand there, do something!* They promise Jesus' ultimate return, but that's not the point. The point is that the disciples' mission – and our own – is right here – in our time and place – on our planet – not some far off sphere. And so the story of the church begins. Even though this is a day when the readings tell us about ascension, we are going to heed the words of the angels and look around at one another and our world today – look around at Jesus with us rather than looking up toward heaven.

The point of ascension is perspective. Rising to the clouds can give us a broader perspective on our lives and the planet. Rather than individualistic images of salvation and personal well-being, ascension challenges us to bring heaven to earth – to live Jesus' values in our world. “*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*” When we live from a Jesus perspective, we can transcend our own self-interest to embrace the well-being of the whole earth – including strangers – enemies – humans and non-humans – all creation.

Today we are called to “go up” – to find higher ground – not to escape Earth's crises, but to gain vision – a mission that is larger than ourselves or our communities – a mission to heal, to embrace, to welcome, to love. We don't need to wait for a far-off day of perfection and rapture. If God is always with us, then right here and now can be a day of transformation and fulfillment.

Endings and beginnings – life is full of both. The ascension of Jesus is a birthing of a very worldly church, which is called not to simply stand around looking up – waiting for heaven, but to be engaged the work that Jesus began. The Spirit-empowered church is to be the continuing presence of Christ in the world. Today, perhaps more than ever, we need to examine our worldview and decide to live from a Jesus perspective – love God, love one another, strive always to make the world a better place. **Amen**

➤ *Christ for the world we sing*

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† Offering

Though the Easter season draws to a close today, we continue to enjoy the blessings God pours out for us in Christ and in creation. Let us give thanks to God for these blessings as we present our offering in Jesus' holy name.

Eternal God, we praise you that Christ has ascended to rule in love at your right hand, while the Holy Spirit continues the work of salvation throughout your creation. We offer our gifts and our lives in gratitude for that work, and dedicate them to your purposes in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

† Pastoral Prayers

Holy God of the humble and the homeless – the poor and the persecuted – we thank you for exalting Jesus and giving him a name above all other names.

Today we rejoice that the meekest and truest of all earth's children is at your right hand. Now we know for sure that the homeless son of man is more truly at home than anyone else on earth. Today the poor teacher who begged for a cup of water and slept in the wilds shows us the way to glory.

Holy God of the defeated and the lonely – the despised and the hungry – the misjudged and the imprisoned – the suffering and the dying – we rejoice with great joy praising Jesus knowing that you are with us always offering mercy, encouragement and love.

Holy One, we pray to you, both when we are at our wits end and when we feel reasonably capable and competent. We ask you to bless our attempts to seek out and serve the lonely, suffering, bewildered, and grieving people in the world. Please do for our fellow human beings all that we cannot do for each other. May no one face distress or calamity on their own.

Guide and bless those who have the knack of loving others thoughtfully and practically. Give each of us the commitment and wisdom to express our compassion in wise and loving ways.

Merciful God, we know that to you each person is precious. Teach us your ways. Let no one be forgotten, none neglected, none despised, and none judged as unworthy.

Bring the day nearer, O God, when your people on earth may be more like the community of grace, mercy and peace, which you envision. Amen

Blessing

Go into the world and in your words and in your lives bear witness to Jesus who has ascended to be everywhere present. May the grace of Jesus Christ, the wisdom of the Living God, and the support of the Holy Spirit embrace us all. Amen