

This message was prepared by Rev. Pamela Graf Short for the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church for the celebration of Ascension, the seventh Sunday in the season of Resurrection, the second day of June, in the year of our LORD two thousand and nineteen. The lectionary texts for Ascension include:

Psalm 47

47:1 Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.
47:2 For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.
47:3 He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet.
47:4 He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves. Selah
47:5 God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.
47:6 Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.
47:7 For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm.
47:8 God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne.
47:9 The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted.

Psalm 93

93:1 The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength. He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
93:2 your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.
93:3 The floods have lifted up, O LORD, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring.
93:4 More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the LORD!
93:5 Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O LORD, forevermore.

Luke 24:44-53

24:44 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."
24:45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,
24:46 and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,
24:47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.
24:48 You are witnesses of these things.
24:49 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."
24:50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.
24:51 While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.
24:52 And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;
24:53 and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Acts 1:1-11

1:1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning

1:2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

1:3 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.

1:4 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;

1:5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

1:6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

1:7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

1:8 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."

1:9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

1:10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

1:11 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

1:15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason

1:16 I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

1:17 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,

1:18 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,

1:19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

1:20 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,

1:21 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.

1:22 And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church,

1:23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Our Bible story for today is an overlooked and under-appreciated story in the life of the church.

It gets overlooked because its celebration does not always appear in the Sunday lectionary.

It might also get overlooked because who really uses the word "ascension" in everyday language?

It is just kind of an out-of-date term.

We could say, "I ascended the staircase", but more likely we say, "I went upstairs."

It might help if you are British because then you would say "Prince Charles is waiting to ascend to the throne."

Astronomers may refer to the ascension of a star.

I did find a few uses in what I think may be related to building a machine:

*The tube V, on the contrary, is attached to the cradle, and merely forms a support for the finder Q, the handles at f and p, and the moving ring P. The latter gives quick motion in position angle; the handles at p clamp and give slow motion in position angle, those at f clamp and give slow motion in right **ascension** and declination.*

(<https://sentence.yourdictionary.com/ascension>)

My point is that because the word ascension is so unfamiliar to us,
it is a little harder than Christmas to remember and harder than the Easter to take hold.

We can see the point of Christmas:

God coming among us with flesh and bones and eyes and ears to show us how very much God loves us and desires to be with us and teach us and heal us and save us.

We can appreciate the importance of the Resurrection: Christ conquering the chains of death and paving the way for us to rise up from the grave.

But once Jesus is alive, who really cares whether Christ walks around in Jerusalem or Detroit or Tontogany, or strolls the streets of gold?

That is pretty harsh I guess, because I sure hope we might all care if Jesus shows up in bodily form in our worship service today. I sure hope that if we were to see Jesus ascend the stairs from the educational wing (because of course he would stop to see the children first) we might actually fall on our faces in humility, honor and fear.

Maybe part of the reason we look away from the Ascension is because we find it annoying, even hurtful that Jesus ever left this earth.

Wouldn't things here be so much better if Jesus had stayed?

Jesus says in John 16:7

7 Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send the Advocate to you.

It seems then that the obvious result of Jesus departure is that God comes to us through Spirit instead of flesh, God can be with all people in all places at all times.

While Jesus places the coming of the Holy Spirit as the primary purpose of the Ascension, there are at least two other reasons the Ascension is important for our Christian understanding of who God is.

I suggest that part of the purpose of the Ascension is to decrease our "earthnocentrism" and increase our understanding of the reign of God.

Perhaps you have heard of "ethnocentrism".

That is when I see my culture,
my people as the center of the universe,
forgetting that other cultures and people have equally valid ways of living
and loving
and hoping
and building community.

By "earthnocentrism" I mean that we get the notion that God is the God of planet earth period.

Yes, God is also the God of heaven,

but I sometimes when I pray "let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"

I forget that God's will is also being done far beyond planet earth;

I neglect to remember that the sovereignty of God reaches galaxies I have not seen or imagined.

C.S. Lewis presses us on this point through his *Chronicles of Narnia* as he creates realms and places where the love of God is lived out in Holy and watchful care.

If you have not read these books in a while, I invite you to make them a part of your summer reading.

Don't get me wrong.

The story of the incarnation of Christ makes it perfectly clear that God loves this created place and these created beings. But God's reign is not limited to this time and place, but rather in Acts 7:48-49 we are told
*"Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands, as the prophet says
"Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool".*

As earthlings we are offered a place of humility in the reign of God.

Wouldn't it be great if God could see Tontogany Presbyterian as a good place for God's feet to rest?

Then again, another reason for the importance of the Ascension attaches Christ back to earth like a mother and an umbilical cord.

Many commentators find it particularly important that Jesus, fully God and fully human ascends to the right hand of God, while extending another hand to us.

John McClure sees this as a human reality that gives us all hope:

All of human life, at the Ascension, moves even more emphatically to God's side! All, in Christ, are moving, sometimes with sparks flying, more deeply into God's being and becoming. In Christ's Ascension we have a vision of humanity in all of its depth and breadth being taken up into, being pulled toward, the heart of God in Christ."

"...This includes the suffering refugee, the abused child or spouse, the victim of war or terror, the lonely one in the nursing home, the one who struggles with depression or a lost sense of worth and value, those who are sick, all who are in difficult transitions in life.

I love this view of the Reign of Christ. I confess that often when I think of Christ enthroned, I think of a powerful God carrying out judgments against the rulers and authorities of this world; against the principalities and powers in heavenly realms—and I do place great hope in this is a reality of the reign of Christ today and in the days to come.

But McClure's understanding of the Ascension focuses what it means to be a monarch; to be responsible for an entire Kingdom. It reminds me that the main purpose of the Monarch who ascends to the throne is to love the people, love the people, love the people. McClure gives me this picture of Christ as the head of the line with all of us following hand in hand in hand forming a human chain that is constantly being pulled into the heart of God by the One who has ascended with us in tow.

Finally, as we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus Christ let us be like astronomers who are in awe of the ascension of a star; let us never get tired of peering and peering again into the heart of the One who sends out light over all that was and is and is to come. O that the Ascension of Jesus Christ would become among us a celebration of honor and delight, gratitude and hope now and for a thousand generations.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.

Now may our God who Ascended into Glory
The One who came as a babe and rose as a victor

Shine over you in Holy Wonder

Judge you with tender, compassionate wisdom

And send the Holy Spirit to fill you with honor, justice, healing and peace

Now and forevermore.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen