

*This message was delivered by Rev. Pamela Graf Short to the Tontogany Presbyterian Church on Ascension Sunday, the thirteenth day of May in the year of our LORD two thousand and eighteen. It also was Mother's Day. The message was based on and supported by the following scripture from Luke 24:44-53:*

- 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."  
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 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.*

**I**n our Bible story for today Jesus exchanges his earthly address for a heavenly one.

He had moved before, of course,  
from heaven to earth,  
from an everlasting and intimate union with God the parent and God the Spirit  
to a human intimacy in the womb of Mary  
to a manger  
to Egypt  
to a carpenter's home  
to camping out on beaches and deserts and hill country.  
He knew what it was to have no real address;  
to have to ask for a place to have supper with his friends;  
to feel at home in a garden  
and to dwell for a time in a tomb.  
Some believe he made a visit to hell during that those three days;  
that in his life and death and resurrection and ascension Jesus cleared the way for you and for me  
to have a different eternal address.

We can fuss about wanting Jesus to stay on earth;  
we can wish that he did not leave,  
but the truth is Jesus' earthly, resurrected body made yet another temporary move to paradise.  
I say temporary because Jesus is coming again to earth,  
though the day and the hour of that move remains a mystery.

I confess that I have not always recognized the importance of the ascension;  
nor have I regularly called you to celebrate it like I have Christmas and Easter and Pentecost.  
But I have come to believe that the ascension of Jesus is an essential piece of the story of God  
and therefore of our story; and that this part of the story should not be set aside like a foot note,  
but should be seen as an indispensable chapter in the dynamic of God's life with humanity and with all of  
creation.

This chapter begins where all moves do:  
at the old address.

According to Luke,

Jesus is gathered with his disciples in Jerusalem.

After chatting with them for a while,

after teaching them about how his story was foretold in the Torah and the prophets and the psalms,

after commissioning them to be witnesses of repentance and forgiveness,

after essentially promising them the power of the Holy Spirit,

Jesus led them out to Bethany.

And now we come to a critical and joyful piece of the story:

*and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.*

*51 While he was blessing them,*

*he withdrew from them*

*and was carried up into heaven.*

“While he was blessing them,

he withdrew from them and was carried into heaven.”

What a beautiful picture of Jesus’ love:

that Jesus’ last act at his old address was to bless those who were staying.

I wish I knew the words of his blessing, though for Luke the point was not the specific words,

but the power, the wholeness, that resulted from the blessing.

One might suppose that Jesus’ departure left the disciples once again in deep mourning,  
but that is not the case.

To receive the blessing of Jesus was to be filled with a desire to worship, with a spirit of great joy and with a continual ministry of blessing God.

This emphasis on Blessing places the great commission of proclaiming repentance and forgiveness to all nations in a very particular and vital light.

I confess that my first response to my own sins and the sins of others is to wag my finger and say “get with it”.

But this story calls for an all-together different approach.

As people left at the old address,

we are to live in the Spirit of Blessing.

Yes, we are to be concerned with sin.

Yes we are to call people to turn from a life of destruction to a life of love.

Yes, we are to be witnesses that forgiveness is at hand and grace abounds.

But we do not make these proclamations from a stance of condemnation,

but empowered with and surrounded by blessing.

I personally find it easy to get caught up in a life of whining and criticism, but this is not the call of Christ.

The call of Christ is to first and foremost to go from Tontogany in the spirit of worship,

in the spirit of great joy, in the spirit of blessing.

*51 While he was blessing them,  
he withdrew from them  
and was carried up into heaven.*

I propose to you therefore that as Jesus settled into his heavenly address;  
as Jesus sat down on the right hand of God the Parent;  
as Jesus took the place of ruler of all that was and is and is to come  
Jesus did so as the Sovereign who is present to bless his subjects.

For God to reign is for God to bless.

Our first response might be to assume that a blessing God is a fluffy God;  
a warm and fuzzy God who ignores the troubles in the world  
and chirps out a happy song while sipping on a martini as the world erupts like Kilauea.

But to properly bless, one must be aware of what is truly needed.

To properly bless one must pay attention to  
the struggles,  
the heartaches,  
the illnesses  
and the wounds.

Words of blessing are like clean water on a dirty cut.  
They flow with the force of love and push out the forces of infection.

Words of blessing are like seeds tucked into the earth.  
They grow silently and produce nourishment for the hungry soul.

Words of blessing are like a shield.  
They stand up as truth guarding the heart of those who are lied to.

Perhaps you have heard a mother cursing her children; calling one worthless; another stupid or ugly or evil.  
If you are like me, you just fidget in these situations. Or maybe your first thought is to scold the mother.  
As a bystander you have the opportunity to speak a word of blessing over that child;  
a good word to that child.  
Or even a good word to the mother.  
I am not saying that your blessing will be met with instant joy;  
I am saying that the act of blessing is the act of the Ascended Christ.  
The act of blessing is a royal response;  
it is a resurrection response;  
it is a sure and certain way of entering into the reign of God.

Jesus left this address blessing others and filling them with joy.

What if when Jesus returns he first sets his feet down in your very neighborhood.  
Wouldn't it be delightful if his return interrupts you blessing your neighbor?  
Or your enemy?  
Wouldn't it be delightful if, when Jesus returns he catches you unaware blessing a child.

Because your Monarch is the One who blesses, you are in extension an ambassador sent to bless. You have been commissioned by the One whose reign is marked by blessing to be a witness of repentance, forgiveness, worship and joy.

Some of you remember and celebrate today that your own mothers were such ambassadors. Some of you remember and mourn that your own mothers never knew how to bless you. Whether your wisdom comes from gladness or from pain or a mixture of both, you now have the opportunity to join with Christ in stretching out your arms over this current address and blessing those around you; whether dear to you or strangers; whether enemies or friends; whether holy or hooligans— your words of blessing will surely bring forth the reign of Christ now and forever more. Alleluia!

Now may the Ascended Christ  
The One who reigns eternally  
with God our Mother and the Holy Spirit  
Stretch out arms of love over your world  
Speak words of forgiveness into your home  
And fill your hearts with  
Honor, glory, love and joy  
Here in Tontogany  
and across the Peaceable Kingdom  
Forevermore.  
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen!