

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking: 'Are you searching for God, but do not know where to look? Don't worry—God knows where you are. Are you searching for faith, but do not know what to believe? Don't worry—you are not alone. Would you love to be able to sing, but do not have the voice for it? Don't worry—the angels are giving it laldy! Would you love to be able to pray, but cannot find the words? Don't worry—Christ is praying for you.'

Hymn – All people that on earth do dwell

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

Risen, Lord Jesus, who prays for us, may we know ourselves, today, surrounded by prayer.

As we step into line with all who follow you may we know ourselves as part of that great company of saints who have kept the Christ light burning all through the ages.

Forgive us, Lord, when we allow the light to dim.

Forgive us when we allow the soot to build up and the lamp to become foggy.

Help us to draw near to you so that our light may shine brightly again and so that we can share your light in the world. Light of the world, go before us in all things and compel us to follow in your wake so that, in your risen power, we can light up the world with love.

And may our worship remind us of who you are and confirm your spirit and your power in us as we serve you in our daily lives, always for your glory.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Reading 1: Acts 1: 1 – 11

Dear Theophilus:

In my first book I wrote about all the things that Jesus did and taught from the time he began his work² until the day he was taken up to heaven. Before he was taken up, he gave instructions by the power of the Holy Spirit to the men he had chosen as his apostles.³ For forty days after his death he appeared to them many times in ways that proved beyond doubt that he was alive. They saw him, and he talked with them about the Kingdom of God.⁴ And when they came together, he gave them this order: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift I told you about, the gift my Father promised.⁵ John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus Is Taken Up to Heaven

⁶When the apostles met together with Jesus, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time give the Kingdom back to Israel?”⁷ Jesus said to them, “The times and occasions are set by my Father's own authority, and it is not for you to know when they will be.⁸ But when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”⁹ After saying this, he was taken up to heaven as they watched him, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰They still had their eyes fixed on the sky as he went away, when two men dressed in white suddenly stood beside them¹¹ and said, “Galileans, why are you standing there looking up at the sky? This Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way that you saw him go to heaven.”

Reading 2: Luke 24: 44 – 53

⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are the very things I told you about while I was still with you: everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the writings of the prophets, and the Psalms had to come true.”

⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,⁴⁶ and said to them, “This is what is written: the Messiah must suffer and must rise from death three days later,⁴⁷ and in his name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.⁴⁹ And I myself will send upon you what my Father has promised. But you must wait in the city until the power from above comes down upon you.”

Jesus Is Taken Up to Heaven

⁵⁰Then he led them out of the city as far as Bethany, where he raised his hands and blessed them.⁵¹ As he was blessing them, he departed from them and was taken up

into heaven. ⁵²They worshiped him and went back into Jerusalem, filled with great joy, ⁵³and spent all their time in the Temple giving thanks to God.

Hymn – High in the heavens

Sermon – ‘In between times’

Have you ever tried to recapture the perfect moment, or event, or experience? Have you ever tried to get back to a time, or a place, or a feeling you once had? Maybe, you had the perfect family holiday, and you return to the place again, do the same things, hoping you will have the same great experience you had the first time. Or maybe you try to gather the same group of people together for a dinner, hoping for the same, amazing, conversation. Sometimes we have such a great experience that we just want to experience it all over again.

Yet, I do not know about you, I think that there are certain experiences, that you can never really recreate or recapture. You can have different good experiences, make different good memories, but you can never get back to that first, original experience, figuratively speaking.

Today, we celebrate Ascension Sunday and I want to tell you that this ‘particular’ Sunday is never one of my favourites. The focus is on Jesus returning to God – and in our reading, we hear of Jesus literally ascending into the clouds. The images seem a little odd to me, following a life of such real teaching and preaching from Jesus. Also, after His death and resurrection, how Jesus returns to God is something I have never particularly thought of being important.

We are also drawing to the close of the Season of Easter – the Fifty Great Days of Easter that span from Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday, which is next Sunday. These fifty days represent the time that Jesus remained with the Disciples following His resurrection. Sometimes, I think we forget about this time, about how long Jesus stayed with them after His resurrection. We think of Jesus being raised, and then, maybe, about either His scene with “Doubting” Thomas or the scene where Jesus cooks breakfast for the Disciples on the beach. Yet have you ever wondered what Jesus was doing for the other forty-eight or forty-nine days? The Scriptures do not give much away.

For, in Luke’s Gospel, we read that Jesus ‘*opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,*’ but we do not get any of the details. In Acts, Luke writes that Jesus

'appeared to them many times in ways that proved beyond doubt that he was alive. They saw him, and he talked with them about the Kingdom of God.' Yet again, there is not much detail here either.

I suspect, that after more than a month with Jesus, after the resurrection, the Disciples nourished a secret hope that everything had simply returned to 'normal' again. After all, they had been eating meals with Jesus again, they had been fishing with Him again, and Jesus had been talking to them about the Kingdom of God again. Just like the old times! Could it not just go on like this forever?

For now, they understand more about what Jesus had been teaching during the last three years. They were ready now, and with Jesus back, the Disciples could surely begin their own ministries – just like before. Only, perhaps, better because of what they had been through together.

However, it is not the same as before. Not really. For Jesus is about to leave them again and though Jesus' victory of life over death is certainly wonderful, now when Jesus leaves them, he really will not be coming back – not in the same way. Not to walk with them on the beach. Not to share meals with them. Not to fish with them. Not to explain to them again about the Kingdom of God.

This is really it, and in some ways, Jesus' returning to God is more 'permanent' than the loss they felt at His death. Jesus tells them to stay in Jerusalem and to wait for the promise of God to come to them. He tells them, *'wait for the gift I told you about, the gift my Father promised. ⁵John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'*

The Disciples ask if Jesus is going to restore the Kingdom *now*, a question they have been asking Him since the beginning of their time together. Jesus tells them, one last time, that He has something different on His mind. He says, *'when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'* Jesus tells the Disciples that their task is to preach repentance and forgiveness in His name to all, nations, and in both Luke and Acts, reminds them that the Holy Spirit is a promise to them from God. With these words, the Disciples see Jesus taken into heaven, taken to God.

So, what will they do now? What will they do next? Well, in Acts, *‘two men dressed in white suddenly stood beside them¹¹ and said, “Galileans, why are you standing there looking up at the sky?”’* Beyond the close of today’s reading, the Disciples finally ‘spring’ into motion. They stay in Jerusalem, as Jesus instructed, devote themselves to prayer and begin to make decisions about how they will be in ministry now, in this new place they find themselves.

The Disciples cannot go back. Things are not the same. They cannot go back to that same ‘place’ with Jesus again, but they are in a different place, a new place, and it is a place with true promise, since Jesus has reminded them, more than once, that God’s promise will come to them. The Disciples cannot just stand still, staring off into the heavens. So, how do they get from where they have been, what they know, to where they are going?

This question can also be applied to us today. As a congregation, where have we been? What do we know? Where are we going? Instead of the Ascension pointing us to heaven, perhaps, it really points us to right here and right now, if we would just adjust our focus. Yet is that enough for us to understand what the Ascension is about?

Luke says that Jesus explained the Scriptures to the Disciples – and I wonder why Luke did not decide that these explanations, these descriptions of the many times He *‘proved without doubt’*, were important enough to record in His Gospel of The Book of Acts. Would this information not have helped us so much, I wonder? Would we not find our own discipleship ‘easier’ if we could have read all that the Disciples heard during this special time with Jesus? If only we could have witnessed all that the Disciples saw? If we had seen those things, maybe we could do better than the Disciples, and heed the words of the men *‘dressed in white’*, to stop staring up to the sky, and get on with the work of being and making disciples that Jesus desired.

Yet, then, I must stop and think. It seemed right to God, did it not, that humanity could go forward even after Jesus had departed? And it seemed right to Jesus that He could leave and know that the Disciples would carry on with His work? And, it ultimately seemed okay, even to the Disciples, to be without Jesus’ daily presence, without His words of teaching and insight each day? So, as the men asked the Disciples in the reading from Acts, we must ask ourselves: ‘People of Eastwood, why are we standing still, gazing up toward heaven? What are we waiting for now? How could we insist that we need even more teaching and direction and guidance before we can move ahead?’

The real trouble is that we barely follow the commands from Jesus that are crystal clear. Jesus gives us commands that are not hard to comprehend, that deal with how we treat others. How we should look out for those who have the least in society. How dangerously attached we can become to our wealth and possessions. How much is required of us to be disciples. Jesus was never backward in coming forward in His teachings.

Therefore, I fear that it is not our lack of understanding that keeps us 'clamouring' for just one more word from Jesus. It is not our lack of teaching and instruction from Jesus that keeps us 'paralyzed', looking into the heavens for another sign. Instead, it is our wish that Jesus had said something different while He was physically here. That He had taught different lessons, that keeps us waiting for one more story; one more parable.

Now, it goes without saying that the last year has been like no other. We are still reacting and responding to the pandemic. Many have been and have still to be vaccinated. We are slowly finding our way back to something like 'normality'. Yet, I do not want us to become so obsessed with the pandemic that our spiritual lives start to stagnate.

I said during our Annual Stated Meeting, I want to stress again, we as a church family cannot stay where we are. Life does not stand still, society does not stand still, so why should the church stand still. We also cannot go back to what was before the pandemic, even if we want too. Yet how do we move forward? Jesus tells the Disciples that they are not without help in this chaotic time in their journeys. They have the promise of God coming to them, the Holy Spirit, that will remind them of what Jesus has said. Teach them again what they have been learning and be their helper, comforter and advocate.

The Disciples must be ready to move. Ready to begin a new phase. Ready to keep on working. They must be ready to work harder, give even more that they have been giving, and lead in ways they have not been leading before. Jesus is not asking less of them at this juncture, He is asking even more of them. He is calling for a deeper discipleship, a deeper faith, than they have yet known is possible. We have the benefit of knowing what those Disciples chose.

They chose to trust in the promises of God. They chose to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, believing that the Spirit would be the help to them that Jesus said She

would. They chose to continue even though they did not know what this new discipleship, without Jesus literally by their side, would be like, and we also know that it was hard for them.

More was required from this point on – not less. They struggled and suffered more, not less but they trusted in God’s promise, and gave thanks for God’s continual blessings on them. They became teachers and preachers. Ministers and missionaries, and of course they were still Disciples, still being formed and moulded by their relationship with Jesus, their love of God and their obedience to God’s calling.

We have some questions to ask ourselves about our life together. For things are always changing and standing still does not prevent change from coming. The promises made to the Disciples are promises made to us. Jesus is not abandoning the Disciples – He is carrying them with Him, and the Holy Spirit transforms them. God’s promises are also for us.

The Holy Spirit is coming, and that Spirit can fill us, inspire us, change us, energise us, strengthen us and move us. Will we trust in God’s promise? Will we become the teachers, preachers, ministers and missionaries? Will we continue the path of discipleship? Will we still listen for God’s call? For times of change are upon us, but they are also times of hope and of promise. So, let us not stand staring into the heavens. We do not need to look for answers there, because we already carry God and His promises in our hearts. Let us go to live like we know it.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hymn – Come and worship Christ the King

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Eternal God, Easter seems so long ago. It seems an age since we greeted you fresh from the tomb, met you behind locked doors or walked the beach with you.

How quickly we forget the joy and the reality of your risen presence in our world.

God, we need you in all your woundedness to draw alongside us and those we love. We need you to remind us that miracles do happen, and that resurrection is possible.

As we look on death and destruction throughout our world, may we not turn away but focus too on your life-giving hope and your life and death and resurrection.

Lord, you came into the world to love the world and to make all things new. May we see your renewing love at work. And may we be channels of that work, loving and serving, healing and renewing, called by you to witness to life in all its fullness.

So, remind us daily of your risen power. Confront us with miracles. Surround us with angels— all those who selflessly give their lives to serve others. And, wherever you call us, may we willingly serve to bring you glory making your risen presence known in all the world. Amen

Hymn – Great is thy faithfulness

Benediction

And so, we go in joy and in gratitude for the love of God, the care and compassion of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Let us go into the world to share that love and joy with all whom we meet. And as we do, may the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest and dwell with us all. Today, tomorrow and always. Amen.