



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
7th Sunday of Easter: May 24, 2020

Gathering Around God’s Word

If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Shout for joy, sing songs of praise
For God reigns over all the earth!
God has gone up with a shout!
Sound the trumpets and sing songs of praise!

OPENING HYMN

Alleluia, Sing to Jesus

#260

CALL TO CONFESSION

Jesus tells us that forgiveness is to be offered in his name. Therefore, let us confess our sins to God, who assures us of new life through the power of Christ’s redeeming love.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Living God, we confess that our faith is sometimes weak, our love for others can be faint, our prayers are often timid, and our gratitude is frequently unconvincing. When we stand looking toward heaven, yet feel far from you, you draw near in mercy to forgive us, and fill us with your power, through the grace of Jesus, our resurrected Savior. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Sisters and brothers, as Christ is our witness, God’s power to pardon is immeasurable. Therefore, proclaim this good news to the ends of the earth: through the mercy of Christ, our sins are forgiven.

The Word

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Come Holy Spirit, open our minds to see the power of Scripture to give life; enlighten our hearts that we might

see Christ in all whom we meet; in the name of the one, holy, and living God, to whom we give all glory. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

New Testament Reading: Luke 24:44-53

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.

New Testament Reading: Acts 1:6-14

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.”

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

SERMON

“A Little Bit Weird”

Rev. David Ukropina

I have to tell you right at the start that this sermon is going to be a little bit weird. Both the sermon and the subject of the sermon are a bit weird, strange and unusual for a number of different reasons. I’ll do my best to describe these different reasons, but I thought I’d tell you about the weirdness right from the start.

First of all, it’s weird because I decided to go just slightly off lectionary and preach on the ascension, which is unusual in itself because it’s not something I’ve ever done before. The ascension always falls on a Thursday, not a Sunday, so it’s never been a part of the Sunday lectionary, and I’ve never preached about it.

The ascension, or the rising of Jesus into heaven, always falls forty days after Easter, so it always falls on a Thursday, this year being Thursday May 21. While the Feast of the Ascension is celebrated in the Orthodox tradition, and the Anglican communion continues to observe this feast, many Protestant churches have mostly abandoned the observance of the ascension, including most Presbyterians.

Now I should say that the ascension as theology is not weird in itself. It’s more like our attempt to understand the ascension can make things a little weird. For example, in ancient cosmology, people pictured the universe as having three parts. There was the place of death, which was below, there were the heavens which were above, and the earth was in between, so they could imagine someone physically going “up to heaven.”

What can be hard and strange for us to picture is the idea that Jesus rose to some place that was physically higher than us, up in the clouds somewhere. With everything we know about physics and science and space, we no longer can picture there being an “up there” where Jesus is physically present.

At the first church I served as a pastor in Texas, I was an associate there, and the head pastor I worked

with always talked about how it was hard for him to picture Jesus physically ascending. He had an off-beat sense of humor, and he said he always pictured Jesus rising up like he had just jumped off a big diving board, and I can still hear him say, “Boing – oing – oing”, as he raised his hands upwards.

Now even since ancient times, Christians such as Origen in the third century have understood the ascension more in mystical terms, and there certainly is a mystical quality to the idea that Jesus is both physical and spiritual, both present and physically absent to us, but this ambiguity does invite us into a mysterious entry way to think about both Jesus and our lives.

The great 19th century poet Emily Dickinson wrote in one of her poems, “Tell all the truth, but tell it slant.” This idea of telling the truth slantwise has been also articulated by the 19th century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, the 20th century theologian Karl Barth, and one of my favorite 20th century preachers, Fred Craddock.

In one way or another, all of them have argued that its impossible for our words and our understanding to fully grasp the truth, and when we try to tell the truth head on, it comes out strange. But in telling the truth, but telling it slant, we can begin to get at the mystery of life, the truth, reality and God a little bit better, even if it ends up sounding a little bit weird.

I think another reason for the strangeness of this sermon is just the time we are living in. In the past few months, I’ve over and over heard people and read about people saying how strange this moment in history is. So many things are changed and turned on their heads. I’ve heard so many people say, in one way or another, “Strange times.”

Last week, Marta referred to this as a kind of wilderness time. It also feels like a kind of in-between time for us. In the past, we worshipped together in the sanctuary, and we will again at some undetermined time, but for right now, we are physically apart, but worshipping together in spirit, and through the computer and internet. How strange.

We are also in liturgically an in-between time. We are after the resurrection, but before Pentecost. We are after the rising of Jesus from the dead, but before the coming of the Holy Spirit, and this connects with the ambiguity of our present quarantine moment. In looking back at my past few sermon titles, I can see this ambiguity: “Absence and Presence”, “Together and Apart”, “A Little Bit Weird”.

We are also, as a Christian people, inherently in the in-between times. We live and have always lived between the resurrection and the second coming of Jesus. Maybe, in this way, things have always been weird for us, and the current historical moment has just helped illuminate it a bit more.

The weirdness of the present moment can help create a kind of opening of understanding of the reality we always face. Now Presbyterians are not particularly known for being weird. In fact, we are a remarkably sane people, by and large. We do things decently and in order, and tend to drive very sensible cars like Honda Civics and Toyota Camrys. Weird is not a word you would tend to use for us.

Still, there are aspects of the ascension that are truly strange. One is that the version in Luke and the version in Acts can be a bit hard to reconcile. The sense we get in Luke is that the ascension happens on Easter Sunday in Bethany. The Acts version places the ascension forty days after Easter, despite both books having the same author. Although attempts have been made to reconcile the two versions, the issue remains mysterious.

Maybe this helps explain why we Presbyterians don’t emphasize the ascension very much. The incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and Pentecost all get more attention. Most of us know or think of the ascension very little. We might picture Renaissance pictures of Jesus rising in the air with white robes on, but that’s about it.

Of course, every time we say the Apostles Creed, we say that Jesus “ascended into heaven,” but I don’t think we tend to give that reality a whole lot of thought. Still, I think its valuable to consider and live into the ascension, just as its valuable to live into the incarnation, resurrection, second coming and other theological affirmations.

First of all, the ambiguity around the ascension, with its presence and absence, Jesus being up there but

not up there, physical but also spiritual reality, all these ambiguities speak to us because we understand them. We understand what its like to live in ambiguity because we live it all the time, whether it's during the coronavirus or any other time.

We live between times. We live between the times of life and death. We live with incompleteness and insecurity all the time. That's just where we live. That's been true as long as humans have been around, but its especially true in the 21st century and living in post-modernity and post-everything.

As the world changes, we have suffering and death, whether to a virus, or all the other many ways that people die. We find ourselves longing for healing and wholeness, but never completely get them in this life. To be human, to be alive, is to experience pain and loss, grief and uncertainty, never feeling completely at home.

We can puzzle about the physics of the ascension, but we understand it entirely, because it's something we know about. Its about loss. Remember this was the moment the disciples forever lost their friend Jesus from being immediately with them. They had been with him, lost him to crucifixion, met him again with resurrection, and now lose him again with the ascension.

Of course we know about this. We lose those we love. Loved ones are taken away from us, and its both a dreadful and bewildering experience. A person who was here is now not here. As Christians, we affirm they are going to another place, a better place, but it's hard for us to picture it. The days after death are strange days. We can feel bereft and somehow grateful at the same time.

When Jesus is gone from the disciples, it must be a hard time, a hard reality. But it is also a miracle, and an affirmation, that he is not going to the place of death, but to the place of God. The disciples see him go up, not down to Sheol, where the dead went. So maybe he is still alive. Maybe our loved ones are still alive. Maybe death is really not the end.

And of course while the ascension speaks to the in-between time, the uncertainty, the ambiguity, we know from the Christian calendar and Christian theology that ascension is not the end. It's not where we stop. We know that if the ascension is over, then Pentecost is coming soon. We are not left in the in-between times, because the Spirit will come, and power will come, and there are important things still for us to do. Ascension looks to Pentecost, knowing that the Spirit will be with us.

Even though Jesus has departed in the ascension, we still feel his presence through Pentecost. We don't worry too much about his absence because his spirit is still alive and present. He may have risen up, but in a way, he is still in our midst.

I once read a story told by a pastor about two parishioners he knew, Ruth and Carl, who were married. During the last, long years of Ruth's life, Carl had sat by Ruth's side, even when she didn't know him. When asked about it, he said, "This is what I took my wedding vows for."

The pastor knew Carl ten years after Ruth had died. She had died during Holy Week, and the pastor told him that it must have been especially hard to lose her at that time of year, and have it be a sad anniversary. But Carl told the pastor that was the best time for his Ruthie, because she was with God, and that's what Holy Week is all about.

At the time of the pastor telling that story, Carl had already died as well, but the pastor talked about picturing Carl walking confidently into heaven. We know little about heaven, what it may look like, how it really is. But we have a lot to hope for, for our loved ones, and for ourselves.

Ascension leaves us here, in this world, full of ambiguities and uncertainty. It leaves us here, but it also points beyond it. Before we were ever born, Jesus changed the way we think about death and dying. As we lean toward the ascension, even with its strangeness, we are reminded and comforted that just as Christ is risen, so we will be also. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

Responding to God's Word

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Let us not cease to give thanks to God who has seated the resurrected and ascended Christ at the right hand of the Holy One in power and great glory. Let us pray.

We give thanks to you, O God, in this and every age, for the healing power at work in Christ to fill our world with grace...

We pray for our world, for all leaders and nations, that they may exercise a spirit of wisdom and serve the common good. Shield those who suffer. Bring them to safety and a new life in you. Make us one family in your love...

Bless your people with food, shelter and healthcare, employment sufficient for flourishing, that all may thrive together by your grace. Fill us with a sense of justice that inspires us to do our part for the prosperity of all...

We pray for all in sickness or in need, that they may know your healing love and power of Christ to bring life in the hardest of times. Keep us mindful of the hope we have in you as we offer your healing to others...

We pray for all who have died, that together, you will bring us to your glorious inheritance of Christ, the one who fills all in all...

All this we pray in the name of him who was raised to live and reign in power for us, our Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray...

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.

Sending of God's Word

CLOSING HYMN

Crown Him with Many Crowns

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BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other. -Genesis, 31:49