

Sermon: Looking Up Towards Heaven

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, May 16, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Ministering to a congregation through a global pandemic has been a lesson in the challenges between presence and absence. Much of the Christian practices hinge on the theological understanding of incarnation, for God so loved the world that he gave his only son, thus Word becoming flesh, the Son of God becoming the Son of Man, bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ. Words of encouragement we give to one another, pats on the back, gentle reassuring hugs become the presence of Christ in our midst; simple handshakes during worship pass the peace of Christ; when two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, Christ is there.

What then if we are unable to gather? How do Christians minister to one another when an initial two-week of social distancing stretches on, becoming now 15 months of physical distancing? What becomes of the community of faith in the absence of fellowship of believers?

Just the other day, I had a telephone conversation with a fellow minister here in Ottawa, who started his ministry right at the beginning of the pandemic shutdown. We were discussing the challenges of getting to know members of our congregations, sharing our trials and tribulations, trading better practices of keeping the community of faith together, and hoping and projecting of what might become when lockdown is finally lifted. One unexpected joy he shared with me during this interim period, is his now full presence in his own family, spending a lot more time with his wife and young children. He hopes that once things get back to normal, his presence would not be replaced by absence, reverting back to his old workaholic self.

Presence and absence is the theme of the Ascension Sunday, as we reflect on the two Biblical texts, one in Luke 24, the other in Acts 1, both written by the same author but to different audiences, describing the scene of Jesus being lifted up into heaven.

The passage in Luke could be divided into three sections. First, Jesus opened the minds of disciples to everything written about himself in the Law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms. So they could understand that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day.

Second, the disciples were instructed to wait upon power from on high, an allusion to the coming of Holy Spirit during the Pentecost, so they would be empowered to proclaim the repentance and forgiveness of sins, to all nations starting from Jerusalem.

In the third section, after receiving the blessing of Christ, the disciples witnessed the actual ascension of Jesus. They then worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, while continually giving praise to God in the temple. It is interesting that the departure of Jesus did not result in an occasion to lament, nor his absence an occasion to grieve, but it became an occasion for the disciples to worship and to rejoice.

The passage in Act 1 describes the same event in similar way with one notable question posed by the disciples. They asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Sigh! The disciples still was not able to comprehend that Christ did not come to restore the nation of Israel, but to inaugurate the Kingdom of Heaven for all people and all nations. Yet Jesus did not rebuke or correct them, but simply replied, "*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.*"

Ascension is that interim period between Easter and Pentecost, between presence and absence, between waiting and moving on. There are, however, wrong ways to look at ascension.

It is tempting but wrong to speculate where or what Jesus had gone to. Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin was the first person to reach outer space in April of 1961, during the height of the Cold War. He was thought to have said, after peaking his head above the sky into the wide empty space, "I looked and looked, but I didn't see God!" That statement (mostly likely just propaganda) was widely promoted by then Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, in an effort to highlight the triumph of both Communism and Atheism. However, in later years, Gagarin's widow revealed that Yuri was actually a devout Russian Orthodox, whom was baptized as a child, and who had their elder daughter baptized that same year he went up to space. He had kept the faith, in secret, even though he didn't see God up there.

It is equally tempting but wrong to focus on the mechanics of the ascension, of how, or how fast or how far was Jesus lifted up. I once read

that if Jesus was lifted up at the speed of light, he would have travelled by now to the edge of the Milky Way. I don't really know if that is accurate or not, and to be honest, I don't really care.

It is dangerously wrong to think one could ascend just as Jesus did. The cult of Heaven's Gate seemed to have taken the text of the ascension, mixed it with belief in UFO, and conjured up some New Age theories of ascending to the 'next level' in the human evolution, by rejecting one's own body, that is through death. In 1997, coinciding with the approach of Comet Hale-Bopp, 39 of its adherents, foolishly and sadly, orchestrated a mass ritual suicide. All these are just examples of bad theology deriving from the wrong ways of looking at the Ascension of Christ.

How then should we read these texts? How should we understand the Ascension of Jesus? Let me suggest, by seeing the departure of Jesus not as an occasion for sorrow but for celebration.

Ascension marks the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. For the disciples of Christ, it is the definite end of the three years of mentorship under their master, sort of a graduation of three-year M.Div. program of theological studies in a seminary. No more travelling with Jesus from town to town, no more parables to solve, miracles to awe, or teachings to ponder, except for what they had already been given. All they are left were memories of those moments, and a clear instruction to bear witness, to tell others of what they had seen, had heard, had understood, and have believed.

One could make a compelling argument that if it weren't for the absence of the Lord in such a dramatic fashion, these disciples of Christ would still be a bumbling bunch, unsure of themselves, of their call, of their power, and of what were needed to be done. The Ascension of Jesus forces them to grow, to grow up, fast.

The text in Acts 1 also gives us an almost comical epilogue, in verse 9-11, *"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.'"*

In his commentary on the Ascension, preacher and theologian Peter J. Gomes, explains that the event has both an upward vision and a downward vision. The upward vision is heaven, the place where Christ has

gone on ahead, to prepare a place for us. Amidst all the troubles of this world, we do need an upward vision, to be lifted up, to find solace, to see hope. Yet we also need a downward vision, expressed in the question from the two men in white robes, "Why are you looking up toward heaven?" probably the same two messengers of God that were also there in the empty tomb. In other words, there are works to be done, fields to plow, seeds to scatter. So be faithful, immerse yourself in the daily life of this world, and in time the Lord will return in the most amazing way as he had left.

With their mind now opened, the disciples of Jesus turn from the ascension event, back towards their lives, with a renewed mandate first to wait then to proclaim. Holy Spirit has yet to come upon them. I am amazed of their response, with immediacy and energy. They worship and return to Jerusalem with great joy. They did not hide in fear, out of sight from others. Rather, they gathered in the temple continually, bearing witness by their presence, giving praise and glory to God. The resurrected Christ is now absent, far out of reach, but the living Christ is in their hearts, in our hearts, ever so present. Disciples and us are now ready to stretch, to question and learn, to doubt and discover, to minister and love one another.

I'll leave you with this somewhat silly illustration. With the rise in global temperature, annual spring floods are becoming more dangerous, overwhelming homes and overtaking lives. That is how a man found himself on his rooftop praying to God for deliverance from the surging water. A rescue truck with modified tailpipe came, barely able to make it to the edge of his house. The crew shouted for him to slide down, but he replied that he trust God will deliver him, so he waited. Later, a lifeboat came with emergency personnel, asking him again to jump down into the boat, but the man replied that he trust God will deliver him. So he waited and prayed harder. A short time later, came a helicopter with a hanging rope ladder, with a voice over loud horn instructing him to jump up and grab on. But the man shout back that he trust God will deliver him. So he waited, prayed, and was overtaken by the flood. When he arrived in heaven (the man was devout after all), he complained to God, "Why did you not answer my prayer?" God replied, "I have sent you a rescue truck, a lifeboat and a helicopter. What more could I have done?"

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.