

A Meditation for May 22/22, 'the 6th Sunday of Easter' – pg. 1

By the Rev. Warren Ball of Mt. Albert United Church

Hello and welcome to my meditation for this week! Today's gospel text, 'The Ascension of the Lord,' is a story that, of all the different gospel writers, only Luke tells, and takes place on the 40th day in this season of Easter, which is this coming Thursday. So, let's remember the metaphorical meaning of '40' in the Bible: it's the time that's needed to get done what needs to get done in a spiritual sense! So, in this Year C of the lectionary cycle, where we have a special focus on the Gospel of Luke, let's turn to his Ascension story a few days before this coming Thursday, that we may learn from its wisdom, and let's begin our journey in prayer:

**In the miracle of Easter, O God, accept us now
and help us to ascend into your love
that our spirits may be opened,
even as Jesus once opened the disciples to new life. Amen.**

⇒ Hymn suggestion: VU334 'All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name'

Today's Scripture reading: Luke 24:44-53 'The Ascension of Jesus' (NRSV)

Jesus said to the disciples, "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 God promised. So, stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Then Jesus 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.

Sermon: 'Going Up, Coming Back, or Staying Put?'

Most High God: lift us now a little higher than we can usually go into the mystery of your being, then join with us there that our living may grow to hold more of your love! Amen.

As the first 'Church of Luke' thought about who Jesus was and what his ministry would mean for them, the idea of his ascension, his '**going up**,' became very important to them for a number of very different reasons. For one thing, in a practical way, it helped those early followers to explain why Jesus was no longer physically present with them. After all, sceptics could say, if Jesus had really been raised from the dead, where was he now?

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Ah, well, now he's in heaven! Jesus' ascension also served as a theological completion of Jesus' ministry down here on earth. You see, if Jesus' birth brought God to earth in a new way, then Jesus' ascension would bring us back to God in a new way! So it is that, for Luke, and Luke only, some forty days after Easter Sunday, we come to the day of the Day of the Ascension – forty days, that same number that we meet time and again in the Bible which metaphorically represents the fullness of God's time.

Well, the idea of ascension may have been all well and good when Luke wrote, for it 'fit' with the understanding of the cosmos that was then in place. It was an understanding where God and heaven were just up there beyond the clouds, while the stars rotated in the heavens around an earth that remained rock solid still. And, that's the story that worked all the way to the 16th century, when Nicolas Copernicus came along with a telescope and started to tell a different story. After Copernicus, more and more people began to believe that the earth was actually rotating around the sun, not the other way around. It's called a heliocentric viewpoint, from the Greek word for sun, and it's quite opposite to the geocentric, or earth-centred view, which had been the gospel truth for centuries. In fact, we humans have been discovering more, and yet more, about the cosmos ever since Copernicus told his story and, then, was quickly forced to 'untell' when he was faced with excommunication! For example, we now know what is up there beyond clouds, and it's certainly not heaven. Far from it, no one could possibly survive 'up there' without a fancy spacesuit! And we now know that the earth is actually but one tiny planet spinning in a vast area called the Milky Way Galaxy, that's only one of many galaxies in a cosmos that's actually getting bigger, and bigger! So, what are we in this 21st Century supposed to do with this Biblical story of Jesus 'going up'?

What indeed! Equally important to the 'Church of Luke,' but equally difficult for us now, is the whole matter of Jesus' 'coming back.' Elsewhere in Luke's gospel, Jesus says, "You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" (Luke 12.39). Or, consider what Jesus says in Mark's gospel, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (Mark 9.1). All of this, of course, fits precisely with the apocalyptic expectations about the end of the world that were widespread in Jesus' day (the 30's CE), expectations to which the historical Jesus himself subscribed. And, some 20 years later, the apostle Paul's writing (the 50's) was, at first, veritably loaded with apocalyptic expectation! But here we are, almost 2,000 years down the road, and I wonder if we don't sound rather like Chicken Little, I wonder if, 'Jesus is coming, Jesus is coming!' doesn't begin to sound like, "The sky is falling, the sky is falling!" because nothing has ever happened! Of particular concern to me is the way that some use the notion of Jesus' Second Coming to justify destructive, non-sustainable behaviours. A huge Millennial Movement throughout the world has said that, since Jesus is soon coming back, and since he's going to fix everything, we don't have to worry about pollution, or toxic waste, or

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destructive practices such as strip mining. Oh, my – what a muddle, what a destructive force has come from Christianity itself, and what on earth are we to do?

Well, how about we recognize that those matters of 'going up' (the Ascension), and 'coming back' (Jesus' Second Coming), while very important to Luke and the formation of the Christian church as a whole, are no longer sustainable as World Views in light of all that we have learned. So, on this Ascension Sunday, why don't we merge the businesses of 'going up' and 'coming back' into a totally new idea: '**staying put!**' You see, through all the different pieces of information that we have about Jesus, and through all the different ways in which his story has been told, through our developing understanding of what all of that means, perhaps we can catch a glimpse of the post-Easter Jesus right here in our midst, where he's been all along! Let's recall the stunning prologue to John's gospel: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... we have seen his glory, the glory as of God, full of grace and truth" (John 1.14). Let's also recall the time that Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you!" (Luke 17:20-21). Let's recall the basis for our understanding of Jesus after that first Easter: if Jesus is no longer with us in bodily form, Christ is nevertheless with us as a living spiritual reality! Just think of the conclusion to Matthew's gospel where Jesus says, 'And remember, I am with you always – even to the end of time' (Mt 28:20).

Why do we even try to read Biblical texts in literal, word for word ways when they're loaded with ancient values, and cosmologies that, simply put, no longer make sense? Luke, and all the New Testament writers, lived, and wrote, out of ancient understandings of how the cosmos works. Now that's certainly not their fault, but let's recognize it for what it is! Remember what the Teacher tells us in the Book of Ecclesiastes? "For everything there is a season ... a time to break down and a time to build up." And, yet, if the seasons of human understanding continue to break down and build up, the fact remains that our spiritual faith has ever, and always, assured us that we are loved and forgiven. It's assured us that we have a job to do, and that we're going to be given all that we need to the job done! Our faith tradition has ever, and always, assured us that we can actually experience Easter's new life in God's love as we place our hands in its service. Praise be to God who reigns above, yes, and beyond, yes, but, most especially, within and among! Hallelujah, Christ is Risen, thanks be to God, amen!

Come, let us turn back to God now in prayer; come, let us pray:

Almighty, Eternal God, we turn to you in this time with awe – awe that, despite the wrong that we've done, you still call us, and awe that, despite the good that we've failed to do, you still claim us! Oh, how we thank you for all the opportunities that you give us to experience hope, and assurance, and direction!

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We pray this morning, God, for the various cultures of the earth, that hostilities may be overcome with peace, that injustice may melt in selflessness, and that strife may resolve in love. And, as we prepare to go into this new week, O God, we pray for your touch: touch our ears that we may hear your voice; touch our eyes that we may see you all around; touch our hearts that we may experience you in our loving; touch our abilities and intentions and prayers that we may meet you in what we do.

We continue to pray for all those who are facing difficulty this day. We pray, too, for all the places where there’s difficulty. We especially pray once again for the people of Ukraine, that peace come and that justice may be brought to bear! In the silence of the next moments, O God, receive the deep burdens that our spirits bear today: *moment of silence.*

All that I have named with my words, all that lies yet too deep for words to touch, we bring to you, God, as we take those words that Jesus once took, and pray together a contemporary spoken version of Christ’s Prayer:

**Holy God, who is heaven:
hallowed be your name, followed be your way
and done be your will throughout creation.**

**Feed us with the bread that we need for today
and forgive us for the hurts that we cause others,
even as we learn to forgive those who hurt us.**

**Strengthen us in times of temptation
and free us from the grip of all that is evil,
for you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever, amen.**

⇒ Hymn suggestion: VU158 ‘Christ Is Alive’

Go now in peace, go and live the totally unique, absolutely needed, piece of love that God has placed in your spirit! In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer, amen.