

## Welcome

Well it looks like we have moved directly into summer, so I'm glad that you are able to take a few moments from your gardening or grass cutting to join us this day on what we call Ascension Sunday. A day we ponder the Risen Christ ascending to the Father and the continuing mystery of Christ's presence in our lives. In times like this when our lives are tested with trials and disappointments, we ponder the mystery of the Christian life which encourages us to be glad and shout for joy. So come worship with us: Searching the scriptures, receiving the Word and moving to the music as we explore the mystery of God. Let us begin with a gathering prayer, let Us pray.

## Opening Prayer

Loving God, on this the last Sunday of the Easter season we celebrate our new life in Christ Jesus. Bring us once again into your presence through your indwelling Spirit that comforts and sustains us throughout our lives. Loving God, may we find the quiet centre of your love today as we renew our love through our worship of you. Amen.

Please take a moment to take a deep breath and relax, and if so inclined, sing along with our centering hymn "Come and Find the Quiet Center":  
Words: Shirley Erena Murray Tune: attr. to B.F. White, harm. by Ronald A Nelson

Video can be found at the following link:  
<https://youtu.be/CXoejFWN1VI>

## Scripture Reading

Acts 1: 1-11; (NRSV)

The Promise of the Holy Spirit and the Ascension of Jesus

**1** In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning <sup>2</sup>until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup>While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the

Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup> While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup> 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."

*Meditation: "Intention Of Ascension"*

*Our life of worship revolves around the life of Jesus Christ, His birth, His ministry, His death and resurrection. The church year is organized around the days commemorating the events of His life: Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and the other special days in between, like Epiphany, Transfiguration, and today something called the Ascension. The Ascension is a very different holy day because it celebrates a departure, an absence, rather than a presence. The first chapter of The Acts of the Apostles records the event:*

*Now when [Jesus] had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.  
(NKJV Acts 1: 9)*

The spectacle leaves one standing, mouth ajar, neck craned back as far as it will go. I think the physical representation of this event is a source of confusion to a lot of people. Our minds are geared to question the 'facts'. And when we do, Jesus is reduced to a superman figure, taking off into outer space.

I am forever telling you stories that illustrate how people see the same things, differently. Here is another.

Three tourists, a minister, a geologist, and a cowboy, were all getting their very first glimpse of the vastness of the Grand Canyon. As the minister approached the viewing rail, he was heard to say, "Amazing! This has to be one of the most beautiful examples of the handiwork and glory of God!" The geologist was equally as stunned, and commented, "Wow! What a wonderful example of the creative process of nature, all outlined before your very eyes in the various strata of rock." The cowboy just shook his head and said, "Can you imagine trying to find a lost steer in there?"

People definitely see things differently. It all depends on what ideas and assumptions we bring to our seeing—in other words, what makes up our perspective. Let me suggest three ways we can look at this story of the Ascension.

First, we may consider the perspective of those we might call 'idealists'. Idealists take the story of the Ascension at face value. Jesus, in his earthly ministry, was a worker of miracles, all of

which culminated in the unsurpassed miracle of His own resurrection. For forty days thereafter, Jesus appeared to His followers, spoke to them His familiar words, displayed His wounded hands and side, and inspired them, on occasion, with a sense of joy. But all this had to come to an end. Jesus had come from God, mandated with a mission to fulfill. The mission was now fulfilled. It was time for Jesus to return to the Father who had sent him. "So," the idealists say, "case closed! God said it. I believe it. And that's all there is to it!"

A second perspective is that of the materialist or skeptic. The materialist/skeptic takes a long, detached look at the whole story, and dismisses it out of hand. To him or her, it is an absurdity. The early Gospel writers had to explain what happened to Jesus after His death, and hence they wove this tale out of sheer fantasy. 'How could a human body,' the materialist asks, 'of flesh and blood like our own, simply go up into the air and disappear?' They quote the first Russian cosmonaut, who, having gone up into the air, returned, declaring, 'There is no God up there.'

And we know very well that in any worshipping congregation today, there are many skeptical brows raised when this story is read, and armloads of questions asked. In this age of scientific advances and cosmic exploration, doesn't the idea of an ascension seem well, so far fetched? Will Jesus return in a space module, making a fiery re-entry? Who do we think we're kidding?

Perhaps the most helpful meaningful interpretation of the Ascension, is the perspective of the realist. The realist looks at the whole incident and asks, 'What does this mean?' 'How do we make sense of it?' 'What is the meaning of the Ascension from the perspective of twenty-first century thinkers and believers?'

I think the meaning of the Ascension is clarified when we see it as an intermediate between the Resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. From this perspective, we can recognize the Ascension as an EXTENSION of the Resurrection. To see things in this way, we need to engage the power of our imagination. We need to read between, and beyond the lines.

One of the ways of getting a handle on reading between the lines when it comes to the Scriptures, is to understand the meaning underlying the frequency of the number forty. Forty is an interesting number in the Scriptures.

It rained for forty days and forty nights in Noah's time. The twelve spies spent forty days spying out the Promised Land. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness. Moses was on Mt. Sinai for forty days and forty nights, receiving the Law of God. Goliath taunted the Jews for forty days before David slew him. God gave Nineveh forty days to repent, or be destroyed. Jesus was tested for forty days in the wilderness. The Ascension happened forty days after the Resurrection.

Forty is a way of describing holy time, sacred time, special time. The Ascension, then, represents the movement from time to timelessness, from the temporal to the eternal, from the finite to the infinite.

Jesus was freed from one place, to be in all places.

The intention of Ascension is to say that Jesus is free from all the limitations of space and time, to be lovingly and powerfully, universally present in every man, woman and child, in every age (cf. Barclay quotation, below).

In other words, though we humans live in time, nonetheless in the human soul, is a place where time cannot reach. In this story, we are in that place of timelessness.

Let me relate to you something I came across the other day, which shows the absurdity of reading scripture in a literal way: "Israel's National Park Authority in 2008 proposed constructing a submerged bridge on the Sea of Galilee which would allow tourists to simulate Jesus' miraculous walk on water. The span was to be built at Capernaum, the site where tradition says Jesus' walk on water took place. The 262 foot long, floating bridge was to be submerged two inches below the water's surface and to enhance the effect, it would not have handrails. Life guards and boats [were to] be on hand in case a [pilgrim] slips off." Thankfully this project was later cancelled!

I would hate to imagine what they might come up with, in order to attract pilgrims to the 'approved' site of the Ascension! They would have to build a launch pad.

But since scripture is a window into imaginative faith, not an encyclopedia of fact, it is useless to try to factualize the reality of faith.

There is a mystery about the story, but the real question is not, 'How did this happen?' The real question is, 'What does it mean?' The meaning has to do with having faith in an unseen, unseeable, eternal world. It has to do with believing in the potential of 'more'. There is more to life than our doubts; more than what we see and hear and touch and taste and smell; more than the physical and material and concrete.

The story of the Ascension is not something we think about very much. It doesn't have the appeal of Christmas or Easter or Pentecost. Yet when we get past the literal words and recognize what it means, we have a vision of a spiritual world proclaimed, where the presence of Jesus is lifted up in the human heart, and God is alive in the humanity of each individual person.

There is a story about a man owned a parrot, and for five years, he couldn't get it to talk. He tried everything. He read books on the subject. He played long-play records, trying to get the bird to learn repeated words. Nothing worked. Disgusted, he took the

caged bird and started back to the pet store. As he crossed the street, a car came barreling right at him. The bird yelled, "Look out!" But the guy got hit, anyway. And the irritated parrot told a passerby, "How do you like that? For five years, he wanted me to talk, and when I finally said something, he didn't even listen!"

To get the message of the Ascension, we have to really listen. We have to really pay attention to the reality of the Holy Spirit I keep talking about.

A religious scholar, William Barclay, wrote:

We might say that the Ascension stands for the final liberation of Jesus from all limitations of space and time, so that he is freed to be lovingly and powerfully present to every person, in every place, in every age.

The departure of Jesus, then, is not so much a movement upward, as it is a movement inward to the place of one's spirit. And what could be more important than that to the life of faith. If we allow the story to inhabit our lives and see it as an inward movement of the Spirit, we can feel strengthened and empowered by it.

I remember once, watching a bird build a nest. The bird laboured at it tirelessly all day long. During the night, a bad storm destroyed the bird's nest. The next morning, it was down on the ground, torn apart and scattered. When I looked for the bird, I found it,



not helplessly mourning its wrecked home, but back up in the tree, labouring, building, another nest.

What does it take to rise again and again and again?

What does it take to lift ourselves up and start over?

It takes the courage of one who believes in the power of a living God, to lift up our hearts, through the mediation of the Holy Spirit.

The literal Ascension of Jesus makes no sense to me, but the elevation of Christ within our heart space gives meaning to scripture, and provides significance to my life. The only appropriate response to the phrase, 'Lift up your hearts' is 'We lift them up to the Lord.' Amen.

### Pastoral Prayer

Almighty God,

We come today reminded of your greatness and glory, your sovereign power and eternal purpose all expressed so wonderfully in Jesus Christ, our Lord:

We thank you for the wonder of Ascension, that marvellous yet mysterious moment in the life of the Apostles, which left them gazing heavenwards in confusion yet departing in joy.

We thank you for the way that it brought the earthly ministry of Jesus to a fitting conclusion; signifying his oneness with you, and demonstrating your final seal of approval on all that he had done.

We thank you that through his Ascension Jesus is now set free to be Lord of all: no longer bound to a particular place or time, but with us always - able to reach even to the ends of the earth.

We thank you that through your son Jesus, through his Spirit, his life and his death and resurrection we are given a deeper sense of wonder, a stronger faith, and a greater understanding of all that you have done.

Father God, Like the Apostles, we too will never fully understand all Ascension means.

We accept, but we do not fully understand.

We believe, yet we have many questions.

Help us, despite our uncertainty, to hold firm to the great truth that the wonder of Christ Jesus goes far beyond anything we can ever imagine, and in that faith may we live each day to his glory and honour living into the words that he taught us to pray saying...Our Father who art in Heaven...

### Closing Hymn

*"Turn Your Eyes"* Original words (V1) and music by Helen H. Lemmel. Add. words (V2-4) by George Romanacce, Nathan Stiff, Nic Trout, and Kevin Winebarger. Chorus by George Romanacce, Nathan Stiff, Nic Trout, and Kevin Winebarger. © 2019 Sovereign Grace Worship/ASCAP, Sovereign Grace Praise/BMI, Sovereign Grace Songs/SESAC (adm. worldwide at CapitolCMGPublishing.com, excluding the UK & Europe which is adm. by Integrity Music). Sovereign Grace Music, a division of Sovereign Grace Churches. All rights reserved. *Used by permission.*

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