

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Ascension Sunday, May 24, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“BEAM ME UP, SCOTTY!!”

Acts 1:1–11 Psalm 47

Ephesians 1:15–23

Luke 24:44–53

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There’s a story of a priest who was going through his normal routine of preparing for worship one Sunday morning.

As was his custom, he opened the church and walked through the sanctuary, praying for those who would gather in that sacred space that morning. He then walked outside like he did every Sunday, to ensure that the peaceful grounds of the church were in order.

This morning, he noticed that a vagrant was sleeping in the courtyard. To make matters worse, the scruffy outsider had his shoes kicked off and his feet propped up on their statue of St. Francis.

The priest, not wanting to cause a scene with worshipers set to arrive any moment, quickly went to the vagrant and told him that while he was welcome to worship at the church that morning, the parishioners would be most upset to see him defiling their sacred statue with his dirty feet.

The vagrant looked at the priest and said, *“I’m happy to move my feet to a more suitable place if this is too holy. To keep me from repeating this mistake in the future, could you tell me what ground is not holy?”*

As the story goes, the unknown man then revealed himself to be St. Francis, and then *poof* — he’s gone.

There’s something about this story that reminds us of the Feast of the Ascension.

In the Ascension, God in Christ claims all as holy and beloved.

This is Ascension Sunday, one of the least celebrated holy days in the Church.

It is entirely possible that you have never heard a sermon or did a Bible Study on the Ascension passages from Luke 24, and Acts 1.

One of the reasons we don’t emphasize this event much, is because it is an uncomfortable passage, in some ways.

As Marth Spong says:

Practical people don’t like this story.

It strains credulity.

We like our Jesus in the flesh – telling stories, walking dusty roads, eating dinner with people. We don’t like him somewhere indefinable.

Yet it’s the truth of our faith that he is more than our brains can rationalize.

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Ascension was the day that Jesus was “*beamed up*”

Susan and I are fans of Star Trek, in all its manifestations. In the original series, Canadian actor James Doohan played chief engineer Montgomery Scott, affectionately known as Scotty.

In many of the early episodes, the phrase “Beam me up, Scotty” was heard. It became a catch phrase in our culture, which you still hear occasionally today.

Susan and I have often longed for the day when we can in fact, be “*beamed*” from place to place. It would certainly make commuting to work, and holiday travel, significantly more enjoyable and efficient.

According to physicists, such technology will never arrive, due to the laws of physics, and the energy resources required. But such statements tell me that they have, at the very least, thought about it.

Unlike most of the beaming on Star Trek, Jesus was beaming away from earth, and he wasn’t coming soon.

His disciples were in awe – all they could do was look up, because in their day heaven was considered to be beyond the skies somewhere.

They had asked him if he was going to restore the kingdom of Israel, as they expected. His reply was a simple NO.

Instead, he told them they were going to receive Holy Spirit power. They were going to be his “*witnesses...to the ends of the earth.*”

Then...up...up...and away He went.

As Melissa Savier says:

“*You have some work to do*” he said, and then he was taken from then.

And there they stood, looking up.

Wishing, I’m sure, that they could have been taken too.

Maybe like Elijah in the fiery chariot. Or on a cloud, like Jesus.

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In these days, beaming up sounds like a pretty good idea.

Even a walk in the park, or a visit with family would do.

But our life here isn’t over, even if it seems that way some days.

Savier continues:

Whatever and whenever our end might be, it isn’t yet.

We can spend our time wishing, dreaming of a world to come, we can see what’s right in front of us.

We can look up, or we can look around.

We can hope in a life to come in the future, or we can realize that hope also has a quality of immediacy.

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Someone has talked of ministers *“who are so heavenly minded, they are no earthly good.”*

I have known fellow Christians who could speak at length about spiritual bondage, reformed theology, or the book of Philemon, all the while ignoring or actively avoiding the poor, the hungry, the abused and the despairing in their own community.

Keep reading in the Scriptures. It will become clear that the disciples, thick as they were sometimes, actually did learn things from Jesus.

Soon after Ascension Day, they were out doing what Jesus did: healing, teaching, preaching, causing trouble [in a good way!], trying to figure out how to be a community together even though they got on one another's nerves.

Does that sound in any way familiar to you – or possible for you?

One day, we are going to be together again – as families, as a community, and as a congregation of God's Church. We would do well to follow their following.

CARL SCHENK:

Jesus is no longer here to heal the sick.

He is no longer here to touch the outcast.

He is no longer here to feed the hungry.

It is up to us, the body of Christ, to continue this work.

If the church fails to be the body of Christ, Jesus is absent.

If the church fails to be the body of Christ, Jesus is nowhere to be seen.

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Perhaps we, at NSJ, could imagine how God wants the world to be, and start trying to make it look like that.

Yes, Christian faith is all about hope.

But hope is very much about the now.

Instead of looking up, look around.

“You have some work to do”, Jesus said.

We'd better get started.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, ASCENDED CHRIST, AND HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

Luke 24: 44-53 – comment

"The mission of the church here is nothing less than to go into the world as God's people, and proclaim a subversive, transforming message about a suffering God who calls anyone, without discrimination, to respond."

OFFERING THOUGHTS

Anne Frank - No one has ever become poor by giving.

Maya Angelou - ...giving liberates the soul of the giver.

Prayer of Approach and Confession

God of history and eternity, you came among us in Jesus, so that we might come to know you and love you, as he did.

Through Jesus' life you have given us a pattern for living, and taught us to love one another and forgive as we have been forgiven.

By his death and resurrection, you promise that nothing can separate us from your love.

In ascending to be united with you, he is now present to every creature in every corner of creation.

And so, we wait with hopeful anticipation for the fullness of your redemption, relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, now and always.

Almighty God, we confess that we have our eyes set in the clouds instead of on the earth

You have given us.

We desire heavenly treasure but we keep believing that worldly means will help us attain it.

Forgive us for our short sightedness.

Draw us away from the temptations to seek worldly power and measures of success, and call us to the down-to-earth message of Your love, to care for the needs of those around us, especially the oppressed and marginalized.

You have called us through scripture to care for the widows and orphans among us; help us to see all those who are left out by society and are in need.

Help us to break down the dividing walls that we have placed, so that we may truly be one, as You and Christ are one. For it is in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Words of Blessing/Assurance

We were made by God, brought forth from the earth, the earth that was called good when God created it.

Your very being is good.

You are blessed, earth-born, and called forth to care for the earth and all who dwell in it.

Go, know that you are forgiven and loved by the God who made the earth, and made you, and share the Good News. Amen.

Litany for Ascension Day

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the right hand of God, a new world has broken into ours—

a world in which justice does come for the poor,
freedom comes for the prisoners, and healing for the sick.

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the right hand of God, a new community has been formed—

a community that loves and cares for all members,
a family that welcomes all who are abandoned and rejected,
a place where all find a place of belonging.

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the right hand of God, a new creation has begun—

all that was distorted is being restored, all that is corrupted is being renewed,
all that was broken is being made whole.

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the right hand of God, God's new world has begun.

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Prayer of Intercession on Ascension (inspired by the events in Acts 1:6-11)

Holy One,

We gaze towards misty heavens knowing you were just with us, and now you are gone.
We watch the skies for just a glimpse of your dazzling grace, and you send us angels, to
bring our hearts and minds and soul back into our lives, our bodies, this very present
moment, where your presence is more difficult to see in the midst of war, of random killing
sprees, bloody revolutions, and random thoughtless cruelty.

We offer our prayers today for:

Those who are suffering, and those who care for them.

Those who are dying, and their loved ones who can't be with them.

The people of Nova Scotia, who have experienced multiple tragedies in recent weeks.

Our leaders, who, we pray, are doing their very best, for all of us.

All the workers who continue to make our life better, every day.

Friends from NSJ and beyond, who we miss greatly.

Your angels come to us through the ordinary moments, reminding us to pray in spite of and
because of...

Your angels remind us that You indeed will empower us to be your light and life and hope in
this world, to the ends of the earth, wherever courage and grace is needed.

We are your people, God, and as much as we love sky-gazing, we know that you call us to
give witness in the middle of terror, anxiety, illness, death, and apathy.

Help us to listen deeply, see far and wide, and live faithfully.

In Christ's words we pray...OUR FATHER...AMEN

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Post-Ascension Prayer (inspired by the events in Acts 1:6-11)

Where did you go Jesus? Where did you go?

We stand, necks craning back, looking heavenwards

But we cannot see you. Where did you go? Did you leave us?

Hush my child,

Listen, listen, Listen for the breeze Listen for the breath

Listen for the Holy Wind's whispered promise.

You are not alone You are not alone You are never alone

My love is yours My strength is yours
My wisdom... all yours for the taking

Listen, listen, listen....

It comes, a gentle breeze, caressing your spirit
It comes, building, energising, filling the spaces
Until you are full

O Holy Spirit! Come!

Breath of God Spirit of God

Our wise counsellor Our constant companion
Helps us to remember that you are always with us In persecutions, and turmoil, and dread In
excitements, and joy and love
In the mundane and every day You are. Here.
O God Our God
We praise you We call on you We rely on you

As we stand and stare, as we wait again, for the reminder that Pentecost only needed to
happen once as you promised, for now the Spirit is always with us

Creator, Brother, Breath
Amen

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BENEDICTION

May God, who comes to us in the things of this world, bless your eyes and be in your seeing.

May Christ, who looks upon you with deepest love, bless your eyes and widen your gaze.

May the Spirit, who perceives what is and what may yet be, bless your eyes and sharpen
your vision.

May the Sacred Three bless your eyes and cause you to see.