

“Blessed for Action”
 Acton Congregational Church (UCC)
 16 May 2021
 Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: 1 Peter 1:3-9, 13a
 Luke 24:44-53

*“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.”*

– Luke 24:50-51

Prayer
Holy God,
Bless the hearing and the preaching of your Word.
May the meditation of our hearts renew our faith and
Be a blessing to your whole church. Amen.

In her book *“The Irrational Season,”* Madeleine L’Engle writes honestly as a woman, mother, wife, and as a Christian about her journey of faith and how the liturgical seasons of the church challenge, renew and sustain her spiritual life. Using both poetry and prose, L’Engle wrestles with the big questions of faith at the core of each season of the church year always unafraid of writing about her own doubts and much less of affirming the dynamism of her faith. Everyone who has read her book seems to gravitate toward L’Engle’s insightful and heart-gladdening reflections on Advent, Christmas and Easter, but her struggle with the Ascension of Christ remains mostly unnoticed. Frankly, it’s surprising that she even devoted a whole chapter to the Feast of the Ascension at all. Ascension Day, which always falls on a Thursday, forty days into the Easter season and 10 days before the Day of Pentecost, has become unfamiliar and almost irrelevant to post-modern Christians who do not know what to make of this odd moment in the Gospel. L’Engle herself expressed puzzlement over the story of the ascension when she wrote, “**And then [Jesus] broke the powers of death and returned briefly to quite a few people—not everybody, but enough so that his presence was noted—though he was never recognized on sight. And then, after a time, he ascended, whatever that means.**”¹

It’s not hard to explain why Christians in the 21st century are reluctant to make a big deal of the Ascension. On one hand, like L’Engle, we do not fully understand what the evangelist means when he says that the Risen Christ “**withdrew from [the disciples] and was carried up into heaven.**” In the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, which, as you know, was also written by the same author who gave us the Gospel of Luke, the writer added even more dramatic effect to the account of the ascension. He said that Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud hid the Risen Christ from the sight of the disciples gathered on the Mount of Olives.² Contemporary Christians like you and me often get

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

stuck on our attempts to fit the Ascension into the scientific matrix of our age. Despite our rejection of Biblical literalism, we still focus too much on the words Luke used to describe the event. We try in vain to understand the physical and spatial mechanics of Christ being carried up into heaven and end up with embarrassing images of Jesus floating upwards on fluffy white clouds rather than paying attention to the idea that the Ascension conveys to the Church.

The other reason why the Ascension is no longer one of the great celebrations of the Church, as it once was, has to do with cultural shifts that have transformed Christianity into a religion of personal beliefs. In this individualistic worldview what matters most is what proves useful and practical to the well-being, happiness, flourishing and salvation of the individual. The fastest growing type of Christianity today is the one that preaches and promises that anyone who accepts Jesus as a “personal savior” has life abundant and eternal all at once. This Christianity defined by immediate individual salvation is grounded in the trinity of modern society “*me, my and myself*,” and it values personal fulfillment above everything else. The mysteries of our faith such as the incarnation and the resurrection may be hard to reconcile with a world of facts and science, but, for this utilitarian version of Christianity, Christmas and Easter are, at the very least, useful. In the birth of Jesus, God reveals God’s saving love for the individual, and, on resurrection Sunday, God raises Jesus from the dead bringing new and fresh hope for the individual. In other words, what really matters is what the individual can get out of the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. But Jesus’ ascension into heaven doesn’t seem to have much to offer to the individual or to a religion seeking instant personal gratification. Much to the contrary, the Ascension appears to be an unnecessary embarrassment for the Church. Post-modern utilitarian Christians are willing to live with the stubbornly impractical and non-scientific celebrations of the incarnation and the resurrection, but the Ascension Day is too much of an intellectual stretch. They cannot see anything useful for anyone or even for the Church in this heavenly-bound Jesus.

The writer of the Gospel obviously thought differently. Luke is the only evangelist who recorded the story of Christ’s ascension as a specific event in time and place, but as I said a minute ago, he believed the Ascension to be important enough to be preserved both in his Gospel and in Acts. Twice, the evangelist tells the story without making any effort to rationalize how the Risen Christ was carried into heaven and eventually vanished from his disciples’ view. Far from being embarrassed by the Ascension, Luke puts the story into writing twice to make sure the Church would not overlook the powerful, sacred, and precious idea the Ascension embodies, that Jesus Christ, the same poor Palestinian Jew who was crucified by the powers of the world, is now in God’s Holy Presence. The feet that strode the dusty roads of Galilee, walked on water and were nailed to the cross did not disappear from history but are by God’s side. The hands that blessed little children, broke bread at the table in the village of Emmaus and was scarred by the brutality of the crucifixion are now the hands of the Living Christ. The same side that was pierced by a Roman spear to prove that the crucified was really dead, the same wounded side that Thomas touched in order to believe, is now

transformed and represents the depth of Christ's love for all humankind. The Ascension, Luke hoped the Church would always remember, is not the end of the story of Jesus of Nazareth but only the beginning of his continual presence with the Christian community throughout the world.

The Apostles' Creed, one of the oldest statements of faith of the Church Universal, puts Luke's words into greater focus when it affirms that, after the resurrection and ascension, Jesus is no longer the young man from Nazareth, but the Christ that ***"ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God."*** It is hard to wrap our educated minds around this idea, but Luke and the Creed are telling us this morning that the Ascension Day still matters because it invites you and me to dare to believe that Christ reigns with God, which means that his life, his love, his resurrection and his abiding presence with us inspire the Church to gather, to worship, to study Scriptures, to preach repentance, to proclaim forgiveness of sins and to be a bold witness of the power of the Risen Christ to heal, change and save human hearts. At times, God seems pretty distant from our lives and from our world, but by celebrating the Feast of the Ascension we join Luke in making the audacious affirmation of faith that the same Christ who lived, died, was raised for all, now lives with God and, therefore, as Paul said so eloquently, ***"neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."***³

The Ascension forever changed the way the first disciples talked and thought about God. It made the Church realize that we would not be able to speak about God without speaking about Christ. As Lutheran theologian Mark Tranvik puts it, ***"Our lens for thinking about God must always include a crucified, risen, and living Christ... We can no longer define God in a way that leaves God completely detached from human experience. The ascended Jesus, who sits at God's right hand, reveals a God who is vulnerable and even approachable. When we turn to God in times of distress or temptation we are not addressing a deity aloof and unfamiliar with our struggles. God knows our trials intimately well and not only comforts us by identifying with our pain but also assures us that affliction will not have the final word because it is the risen and ascended Christ who intercedes for us"***⁴ and holds us close to God's own heart.

The Risen Christ knew that the disciples would have a hard time understanding what his ascension would mean for them and for the Church, so he spent the last forty days in Palestine as a teacher,⁵ opening his friends' minds to the Holy Scriptures. Christ did not want his followers to merely hold on to what they already knew about the Law of Moses, the prophets, or the Psalms, he wanted them to read the Sacred Texts through the real life experiences they had while he was ministering among them. Jesus invited the apostles to understand Scriptures in the light of his mission to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, new sight for the blind, hope for the hopeless, to lift up the powerless and announce the time of God's favor.⁶ And this, my friends, is still

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

the central mission of the Church. We have been gathering on Sunday mornings even during the pandemic to challenge each other to open our minds to God's Word. We turn to our Sacred Scriptures every week not to listen to what we already believe and understand, but to allow the Living Christ to give us new insight into what it means to worship the God who was revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We spend 15 to 20 minutes every Sunday reflecting on these ancient words because we believe that God speaks to us through these stories and gives us the courage to imagine our own lives shaped by repentance, forgiveness, grace, and by the radical commitment to peace and justice that were visible in the life of the Christ who breathed, lived, died, was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven.

We need our minds to be fully opened to Christ's love to understand that the Ascension kept the disciples from dwelling only in the past with their memories of what it was like when Jesus was physically present with them. Rather than asking his friends to withdraw from the world and keep to themselves, the Risen Christ gave them a forward-looking direction. His Ascension, he told them, would widen the circle of inclusion in the Church and would take them out of their comfort zone to preach repentance and forgiveness of sin in his name to all nations.

In his celebrated book *"In the Shelter,"* Irish theologian and poet Pádraig Ó Tuama opens the minds of his readers to a whole new understanding of the word "repentance." He acknowledges that for too many Christians, "repentance" has been used as a bludgeon or a burden causing guilt and pain rather than offering hope and freedom as Christ hoped it would. So Pádraig takes upon himself to reclaim the real meaning of the word. In its original Greek, he writes, "repentance" **"means to change your thoughts, to change your mind, to turn in a new direction, to reverse a direction and go a different way."**⁷ Then he adds, **"Technically, then, this should mean that the Christian faith is a faith that is adapted to change."**⁸ Finally, Ó Tuama says that "repentance" gives us the responsibility to re-orient our direction every time we miss the mark, which is the Biblical definition of the word "sin," and close our minds to the power of Christ's Ascension to make the Church more diverse, more welcoming, more imaginative, more creative, more flexible, more vibrant, more eager to change and adapt.

If there is one thing we all had to learn in the last 14 months is that the willingness to go on a new direction, to let go of what had always been, to broaden our understanding of what the word "church" means has kept our congregation alive, engaged, and faithful to the Risen Christ through the pandemic. I believe it was our church vice-Moderator Janette Blackburn who said that the pandemic has forced us to be a church beyond our walls and property lines. Our virtual services have allowed us to re-connect on a deep spiritual level with former church members who had moved away. New friends from near and far have been joining us in worship every Sunday. More people have volunteered to sing and play in our services since March of 2020 than during any of the previous two years. People from places as far as the Czech Republic, Brazil and Australia have attended and participated in our services. The pandemic has

shown what is possible when we repent, change our minds, turn our hearts to Christ, let the Word stretch our imagination about what is possible and take the responsibility to reverse direction and go a different way when we fail to preach the inclusive message of repentance and forgiveness of sin. My hope and prayer are that when we return to in-person worship services, we will continue to be creative, will continue to widen the circle of friends and members of our congregation and will not be close-minded whenever Ascension Day reminds us of our mission to keep alive the holy rumor that Christ lives and even though we do not see him; we love him, we believe in his Gospel, and we will do as he asked us, namely to look out into the world rather than back to the past or up to heaven. We will be a church that lives our faith out beyond the church property lines rather than behind our stained-glass windows only.

“Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.” I have always loved this image of the ascending Christ with his arms stretched out to bless his friends, but it was only recently that the word “blessing” in this passage caught my imagination. I decided to look up, not the Greek word used in this text, which means “to speak well of” another person, but the meaning of “blessing” in Hebrew. In the New Testament Greek, the words translated as “bless” and “blessing” literally mean – to praise, compliment, commend and even express admiration for someone or something. On the surface, Luke appears to be saying that the very last thing Jesus did while he was being carried up to heaven was to say words of praise for his closest friends, to pronounce their goodness before God. In Hebrew though, which was the cultural context of Jesus and his disciples, the word most commonly used for “blessing” has a much fuller meaning. Etymologically, it is related to the Hebrew word for the knee and the notion that it conveys is that to bless someone, to offer another person a blessing, is akin to taking the knee out of deep respect for that other person in order to give them something of great value. This means that when Jesus blessed his disciples, he was giving them the precious gifts of faith, hope, and love that freed them to go on living for something much bigger than themselves even after his Ascension.

Before my mind was opened to this much more robust meaning of the word “to bless,” I was always surprised at the reaction of the disciples. I couldn’t understand how they could experience the Ascension not as another tragic loss after the crucifixion, but as a moment of great joy. Now it all makes sense! When the Risen Christ raised his hands to bless his friends, he was humbly leaving with them a priceless gift, which was his faith that they could be witnesses of his life and love. In the simple act of offering a blessing, Jesus was giving his first disciples the privilege and the responsibility to make his presence real in the world. The last thing Jesus did before being carried into heaven, whatever that means, was to release his followers from their sadness, anxiety, uncertainty, and fear and, out of a deep love and respect for them, Jesus blessed them with an open mind and an open heart to imagine a faith community that would strive to change and adapt so it could be a blessing for all humanity.

And what a difference it made in the lives of the disciples to be blessed! After the Ascension, they were energized. They were ready to discover what it means to live in the world knowing that at the heart of our faith is this Risen Christ who very humbly gives humankind the gift of salvation. After being blessed, the disciples' sorrow turned into joy, their grief into courage to proclaim Christ, risen and alive, their disbelief turned into their first act of worship as a Christian community.

Then Luke makes a full circle and ends his Gospel at the same place where everything started – at the Temple. It was in the Temple in Jerusalem that an old priest called Zechariah entered the sanctuary of the Lord and an angel gave him news of joy and gladness.⁹ According to Luke, it was in that moment that God set into motion the story of salvation that would forever change and bless human history. At the end of the Gospel, on the day of Christ's Ascension, the disciples went back to Jerusalem to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit and they gathered in the Temple continually, humbly offering God the gift of their own lives.

Soon, more precisely, on Sunday June 6th, we too will return to our church building. After 15 months without gathering in-person in our sanctuary, I hope that you will be excited to come back to worship Christ and offer God our own lives as vessels for God's love and grace right here in our temple, our own place of worship, our sanctuary. With the historic announcement on Thursday, the Day of the Ascension, the CDC has given us hope that we will be able to be together in-person in small-group gatherings. Our plan is to hold outdoor services in the month of June and be back indoors on July 4th.

The re-opening task force the Church Council commissioned to prepare our congregation to re-gather in-person has been working diligently to do everything possible to make our first service on the church grounds a joyful moment for all of us. Next Sunday, Rod Kunz, one of our church members on the re-opening task force, will offer a presentation during our virtual Coffee Hour to make sure that everyone understands how the task force is planning to re-open our building and how science, the CDC, state and denominational guidelines have informed and will continue to shape our gradual re-opening process. This week, you will receive more information about the safety protocols we will put into place to ensure that those of you who are ready to return to in-person gatherings can do it safely.

I know that some of you are not yet sure if you are ready to come back to our in-person services. After spending a year wearing masks and practicing physical distancing, it will take time for some of us to feel comfortable coming back to our sanctuary. I also know that a few of you due to your location or circumstances can only be part of our congregation from a distance. I want to make it as clear as possible that we will continue to offer our virtual services every Sunday even when we are able to open at full capacity. The spiritual connections we have made online will remain a vital and important part of our church life, mission and ministries.

“Prepare your minds for action.” These words from the First Letter of Peter pretty much define this moment in the life of our church. It’s time to prepare to return to in-person services. It’s time to rejoice in our call to worship God together. It’s time to take the first steps back to this place where we bless the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for our salvation. It’s time to adapt to a new way of being a church both here in Acton as well as beyond our property lines. It’s time to rediscover how our gatherings and our ministries can make Christ’s presence real in our world. Friends, it is time to take to heart the precious, sacred, and powerful idea at the core of the Ascension of Christ, namely, that the Risen Christ has given you and me this world-changing gift of faith and, as if kneeling down to show the depth of his love for us, Christ has blessed us for action. It is time for us to return to our sanctuary and continue to humbly offer our lives to God so we may be witnesses of the Christ who ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Madaleine L’Engle in The Irrational Season, p. 113 [Kindle Edition].

² Acts 1:9.

³ Romans 8:38-39.

⁴ By Mark Tranvik in The Ascension of Our Lord, published in Working Preacher, 12 May 2013 [https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ascension-of-our-lord/commentary-on-luke-2444-53].

⁵ Acts 1:3.

⁶ Luke 4:18-19.

⁷ Pádraig Ó Tuama in In The Shelter, p. 185.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Luke 1:5-14.