

A Reflection for Ascension Sunday-May 17, 2026

by Jennifer Irving

I've heard of some people who love "Ascension Day". The day on the Liturgical Calendar that we celebrate as the day following the resurrection that Jesus "ascends" back into heaven to sit at the right hand of God, or whatever. I believe it is celebrated 10 days before Pentecost, or 40 Days after Easter I guess—dealer's choice. I don't know if you can tell but I'm not one of those people. First off, I'm not totally sold on this idea of "Heaven" being some place in the clouds, high above us, where God and Jesus and all the angels hang out and look down on us. My God is just a little to, all around us for that. Plus, we all know how heaven gets twisted up into this eternal place where we go when we die (and don't even get me started on what some people think is the only way to get into heaven). So, it shouldn't surprise you that I'm not a fan of the image itself of Jesus "ascending" away from his disciples following his resurrection. But that isn't even the real reason I'm not a big fan of this reading from Acts describing the Ascension of Jesus. Mostly I don't like it because it just makes me so unbelievably sad. Why does Jesus have to leave? I can put myself so firmly in the shoes of those first followers of Jesus, so overjoyed and shocked because of the resurrection that they can hardly believe it, standing there, looking up, as he disappears yet again from their sight. Since Neil died, I've woken up from a dream that was so real I swear he was actually with me, to the reality that he is gone and isn't coming back—and I honestly wouldn't wish it on anyone. Maybe that is why I relate so deeply to the anguish on those upturned faces being admonished by a couple of angels. What's a disciple to do? It's just not fair. How can they possibly know what to do now, without him, left alone without an action plan and barely even a mission statement to go off of.

And what struck me this year about this reading was what those disciples did in the wake of Jesus leaving them, yet again.

They didn't immediately pull themselves up by the bootstraps and get on with it—travelling about two by two and telling the stories of Jesus while giving away the coats off their backs—or were the places they were going to the ones who were supposed to be willing to lose their shirts? Either way, they didn't do that.

And, they didn't turn to one another and say—"we have to look on the bright side here boys!" It's time to start our gratitude journalling and think positively. There's a silver lining to all of this, let's just get busy and look for it.

They didn't even immediately gather back in Jerusalem and put their Mission Statement on paper or start drafting their 8-10 point Action Plan on how to become a Church of Jesus Christ proclaiming good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, setting the oppressed free, and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18)

Nope, our scripture reading from Acts tells us that they returned from Jerusalem (which I say—good on them—way to keep moving), retreated to an upper room where they were staying (that's more like it) and there, "they all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 6:14) That's it. That's all they did. They prayed. Constantly.

In this day and age of action and moving forward and figuring things out and getting things done—it seemed shocking to me.

I'd never really noticed this inauspicious beginning of the church. I guess I always skip ahead 10 days to Pentecost when the Holy Spirit blows through that upper room and what I consider the "real" church is born. Where the disciples get out and about with their preaching and proselytizing and thousands of people start believing in what Jesus was trying to tell them about what the Kingdom of God looks like and who all is allowed in it. Thank goodness for the Holy Spirit I think—without it there would be no church!

But, this week I kept coming again and again to that image of the first followers of Jesus, devoting themselves to prayer.

It's not surprising really that I would skip over this part to the action. You know that I've always had a somewhat rocky relationship with prayer. Mostly because I've seen the harm done to people who have been told that if their prayer was sincere then whatever they were praying for would happen. And then their mum died anyway, or they lost their house anyway, or the promotion went to someone else, or the cancer came back... and because of this, I've been tempted many a time to throw the baby out with the bath water and just get rid of prayer in my life altogether.

Yet here are these faithful followers of Jesus, devoting themselves to prayer.

Is it possible that this time that the disciples spent devoted to prayer was actually a necessary step in the Pentecost story even happening? That it was this time spent sitting and listening for the voice of God to speak from their heart is what gave them the courage and strength they needed when the wind and fire consumed them? Is it this time in prayer that helped them to find their way forward as a new church?

I believe the answer to my wondering is yes. Prayer is so much more than asking God to do things for us. Prayer is the way we centre ourselves and centre God in our lives.

Like we sang at the start of this worship—prayer is the quiet centre in the crowded life we lead, it's the room for hope to enter, it is the frame where we are freed. Prayer clears the chaos and the clutter and clears our eyes. In prayer, we can simply be! And in prayer we can be bound to one another and to all creation in ways that are life-giving and life-changing. That is the true power of prayer.

Right now, the United Church of Canada is looking towards 2035 and in her video introducing the resources for Towards 2035 our Moderator Kimberly Heath invites us to "begin with prayer", "listen", and "perceive the new thing God is doing". She suggests that when we listen deeply, pray intentionally, we can begin to perceive the new thing God is doing among us and that "Through prayer we ground ourselves in God's love, open our hearts to the Spirit's movement, and listen for the voice of Jesus, our teacher, saviour, and friend." She says she "truly believes God will give us what we need to answer the call of this moment." so we begin with prayer, with listening, with trust. (https://youtu.be/S2q6TFNGuJo?si=abXd0S1wsjF_n_4Y)

Doesn't that sound exactly like what the disciples did? And look where it got them!!

My Grandpa Peters always used to say "if it ain't broke, don't fix it". Maybe prayer isn't so broken after all! So, before we sing together about how prayer also binds our heart together in Christian love, let us join in one of the prayers the Moderator offers us in the resources for prayer on the United Church of Canada Towards 2035 Resources Page.

A Prayer for Communities of Faith in The United Church of Canada

Gracious and loving God
You called into being
This United Church of Canada
One expression of Jesus'
Beloved community,
Here in the particularities
Of our place and our time.
For the past 100 years
You have guided and sustained
And called us back when we have erred.
Now, as we look back
We also look forward,
Daring to believe
That even among us
Even in this very place
You are doing a new thing.
We long to perceive it
Like a way through a wilderness
For the sake of our neighbours
For the sake of this world of beautiful
And broken things
Yearning to be made whole
Yearning to be made new
May we perceive and live into it. Amen.