

ASCENSION SUNDAY  
He did not leave us forever  
He will return! Hallelujah.



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REV. DR. DEBRA J. HANSON

## **Welcome**

**Hymn:** “Jesus Loves Me” (UMH #191)

**Scripture:** Luke 24: 44-53

Focus verses: 50-53 (CEB)

He led them out as far as Bethany, where he lifted his hands and blessed them. As he blessed them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem overwhelmed with joy. And they were continuously in the temple praising God.

**Message:** “Up, Up, and Up!”

This week I was fascinated as I read some of the commentaries on today’s scripture passage. The one that really caught my attention was written by Rev. Peter Woods from South Africa. He said that the European missionaries who went to Africa years ago had some real challenges as they shared the story of Jesus with the indigenous tribes who all believed in “God” for whom they had various names depending on the tribe. One of the problems came when talking about Jesus’ ascension because the African tribes believed that God lived in caves and holes right here on earth. They had no concept of God “up there” somewhere in the sky or beyond the sky as we do in our Western religion. These natives were deeply religious, and to shift their thinking was a highly disturbing experience for them.

Our beliefs come out of the European tradition from the time when the predominant thought was that the earth was flat and covered by a dome, so when they spoke of heaven, it was easy to point upward to somewhere beyond the dome. But the African belief of God living here on or in earth could affect the way we look at ascension Sunday. From the African theological perspective, Jesus would descend back to earth instead of going up into heaven. I wonder if that perspective might give us something to think about in our own faith journeys.

Today’s Luke passage talked about Jesus spending time with the disciples, explaining again the link between the scriptures and his life, death, and resurrection. He reminded them that they were commissioned to carry on his work in the world, and that they could wait for the power of the Holy Spirit to

help them in their ministry of sharing the Good News. After all, they were witnesses of all that had taken place. They knew Jesus personally, had traveled with him everywhere, been given special privileges of learning from him, watching him work, being trained and sent out to spread the good news of God's love and healing to others, and absorb whatever they could from Jesus in person.

When Jesus led them out to Bethany and said his farewells, he left them standing there looking up into the sky as he disappeared. When we put the African theological perspective into it, we could ask, "What would happen if Jesus disappeared into a cave?" Would that change the way we understood the presence of Jesus in our lives? Would he seem even more real and present with us? Would it bring us closer to Jesus, remove some of the mystery or help us to walk more carefully on this earth if we thought Jesus was actually dwelling in earth? It's something to think about. (*Ideas drawn from Text This Week under "Peter Woods, I Am Listening" commentary for the Ascension Day Luke passage*)

The point of the ascension of Jesus is that he commissioned the disciple so they would then carry on his work in the world. They were witnesses for Christ and had to see all these things, taking what they had learned and sharing that with the world - with others - as they spread the Good News of life in Christ. Of course, as I said, they had the advantage of knowing him personally. We, too, have been commissioned to share that same Good News, but we have the disadvantage of not having met Jesus in the flesh. However, we HAVE met him in a variety of ways: through the scriptures, our worship times, and through church teachings and traditions, as well as the experience of others who believe in Jesus. I wonder - again - if we thought of Jesus as being here in the earth if he would seem closer, more "touchable," more available. Maybe his ascension into heaven makes him feel removed enough that we just can't relate. I don't know, but it's interesting to consider this thought.

What I do know is that his promise of sending the Holy Spirit really does make his presence closer to us as long as we listen and pay attention. The idea of the Holy Spirit means that God in Christ is present with us, but we need to be living with awareness and be awake so we can recognize the Spirit's guidance

and direction for us. Ultimately, we, as the Church of Jesus Christ, are called to be the same type of witnesses as the disciples were. We are called, as the United Methodist statement of purpose says, "To Make Disciples for Christ." How do we do that?

Professor Alyce McKenzie shared a modern-day parable: "My dad lay dying of liver cancer in his study at my parents' home that afternoon in November of 2002, and I sat in the kitchen staring into a cup of cold coffee. My niece though, was a different story. Ava was then 5 years old. She had hovered near grandpa's bed earlier that day, patting his hand as the hospice worker came to check on him. That afternoon the doorbell began to ring as visitors came to pay their respects to my dignified, dying dad. My mother wasn't sure how to handle this. Not sure that friends would want to visit a deathbed. Maybe they'd prefer to stay in the living room and just verbally express their care and concern.

She was showing one couple into the living room, when Ava came up and took the man by the hand. "Want to come say goodbye to my Grandpa? He's leaving soon." She led them back to his bedside. There they simply said, "We love you, Bob." And he was able to say, "You two have been the best friends a man could have. I love you too." Who would want to miss a moment like that? From then on, Ava became the doorkeeper and hostess. She was the best qualified for the job that day. Because she got that this moment was important and that it wasn't all sad.

Luke reminds me of Ava in the way he portrays Jesus' departure. He has shown us the joy that came when the disciples recognized Jesus (24:41). He has shown us Jesus' assurance to his friends that, though he is leaving, they will never be without him. Why would they not want to savor this moment, while tasting the salt of their tears? What is there to keep joy from overcoming their sorrow? What is to keep them from returning to Jerusalem with great joy and praising God in the temple?" (Alyce McKenzie, *Edgy Exegesis*, found at *Text This Week for the Ascension Sunday Luke passage*.)

What keeps us from finding great joy and praising God continuously, if anything? If we are witnesses to God's action in our lives, then what would help us to be delighted enough to want to share it? Jesus' commission says

that the disciples (including us) are witnesses of what Christ has done in our lives, and how we are to share it. So, let's try something - be interactive. Let's how we would answer the question, "Where have we seen God at work this week?"

God IS at work, as you may have noticed as you were reflecting on the question, and I suspect when we think about it, we can find other ways we see the Holy Spirit in action through others or situations that occur every day. What if we started to write it down, to pay attention to those nudges, to be willing and open to God at work in our lives. We aren't talking only about those things in the sky that will come in some future time but the things that are here in earth filled with those who have been left behind to carry on the work of Jesus in the here and now. Where can we all find ways to care for God's children? It's a constant process of being open to the Spirit's leading. How will we share Christ with others this week? May you find an abundance of blessings! Amen.

### **Prayer:**

Hi, God! Today we remember when Jesus left this earth to return to heaven with you. He left all of us in charge to keep sharing your love with others. Help us to remember what he taught us and live in the ways that honor you. Most of all, we thank you for sending Jesus to give us life forever. We want to be more like him and show kindness and respect to others. We love you, God! Amen.

### **Lord's Prayer:** (From Gather & Grow)

Dear God our Father, who lives in heaven, there is power in your name. We trust your ways...from your kingdom in heaven all the way down to earth where we live. Please provide all we need today. Forgive our mistakes as we forgive those who make mistakes against us. Help us to make good choices and protect us from all that is evil. Everything we have and do is all for you so everyone we meet will see you in us, forever and ever, Amen.

### **Hymn:** "I'll Fly Away" (FWS #2282)

### **Sending Forth**





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# WE LIFT UP IN PRAYER

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Juliann  
Joan Allen  
Naomi  
Erin Frane  
Madeline  
Charles Gilman  
Josh Jones  
Aerial Silanpaa

Harry Junkins  
Marilyn & Gil  
Donna Smith  
Sophia  
Bobbie Noble  
Dan Strange  
Danny Westbrook  
Pastor Sue Ellery

Christine & her parents  
Jenn-Stebbins daughter-in-law  
Those in nursing and assisted living care  
Our Church family



# WHO WE ARE

## FUMC PORTSMOUTH A RECONCILING CONGREGATION

We, the congregation of the First United Methodist Church of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, are dedicated in worshipping, learning, and serving with all people as we embrace Jesus Christ's message of love and acceptance. As a United Methodist Church we stand fully behind the statement "Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors". We celebrate our diversity and invite all persons regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, sexual orientation, marital or socioeconomic status, nationality, physical or mental ability into full membership and participation in the life of this community of faith.



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