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**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**May 16, 2010, Ascension Sunday**  
**Luke 24:44-53**  
**“Looking Up”**

It's easy to admire someone who has an impeccable sense of timing. You know the type: the person who knows *just* when to insert a joke into a lull in the conversation or wrap up a visit so you have plenty of time to get the kids into bed. They know the best day to get the tomato plants in the ground without risk of a nightly frost, and for how long they should leave the turkey in the oven. These people seem know the perfect length of time for a three-year-old's birthday party, when to find the best sales, and how to retire gracefully. They know when its time to hang on, and when it's the right time to let go.

Our Gospel lesson for this provides one more demonstration of **Christ's impeccable timing**. Even though Jesus doesn't always do things the way others would prescribe, he always seems to get it right. And so it is in this Ascension account: *once again* we get the story of a Christ who knows how to introduce the realm of God's eternity into the linear timeline of humanity so that, *once again*, the fullness of God's kingdom can break into the God's creation. As he leads the disciples to Bethany, where the veil between heaven and earth will grow thin – **Jesus just seems to know that the time is right**.

In Jesus' perfect timing, He **knows** that the disciples are finally ready to understand the scriptures and that with this understanding they are poised to proclaim the Gospel of repentance and forgiveness in Christ's name. He **knows** it is time for them to receive the power of the Spirit – and that in

order to send the Spirit, he **knows** it is **time for him to go**. And so Christ orchestrates a series of events to once again usher in God's eternal kingdom into the realm of creation. With a few final instructions and a blessing over the disciples, Jesus withdraws to heaven to be seated at the right hand of God the Creator in glory.

And, the text gives us evidence that Jesus gets the timing right. For the Gospel shows us that the disciples *are* ready to understand and respond; that they are ready heed Christ's call and to live as God's people. Luke shows us with this departure that the disciples do not hide nor do they grieve – in fact, they are filled with **joy** and return to Jerusalem to sing God's praises in the temple.

And so ends the most wonderful of stories. Luke gives us a tidy close to his gospel before leading us on to the next installment in his story, the book of Acts. But as impeccable as Christ's timing is in this passage – and even as awe-inspiring as this final chapter is – **we don't always know quite what to do with this text**. In fact, I bet if asked, many of us would answer that Luke's gospel ends with Jesus' appearance on the Road to Emmaus – and, if asked, we might answer that the book of Acts begins on the day of Pentecost – when in actuality, Luke offers two accounts of this Ascension story – at the close of Luke and the beginning of Acts. This story is the bridge between his two Biblical books – that which concludes the Gospel as Christ's final awe-inspiring encounter with his disciples, and it begins the book of Acts as the story that sets the stage for a Church to be born. Yet we often just gracefully dance right over this part of the story.

Frankly, the ascension of Christ is not usually the most comfortable or interesting theological claim for us Presbyterians. Formally celebrated on Ascension Thursday, 40 days after Easter, we Protestants often skip over this theological lesson unless we squeeze the teachings in on the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, the week right before Pentecost. Sure, we state in our creeds that Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, and the Ascension is explicitly affirmed in our Confessions. But it is not a theological benchmark that resonates with us as do the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The story of the Ascension is one that seems to insist on **a transcendent, other-worldly God-in-Christ with power over creation**. This heavenly kingdom in which Christ sits enthroned at the Creator's right hand is so *distant* a region we cannot even imagine where it might fall on a celestial map. We, on the other hand, **gravitate toward a Christ we can see and touch**, one who we can *experience*, one with whom we can identify because this same God identified with *us*. We can love a God who we envision as a baby as we hold our newborn nephew in our arms. Or we can love the prophetic teacher of justice as we remember those whose teachings have changed our lives and inspired us to action. We can love a God who died to save us as we think about those whose sacrifices kept us safe or enabled us to make something of ourselves. And we can even love a God who rose from the dead in the hopes that we – and all we love who have gone before us – can share in His resurrected glory. But a God who just drifts away into the heavens, like a character out of a myth or science fiction movie, can appear a distant God – a God who seems far away, hard to reach, and certainly hard to understand.

**Yet the Ascension, ironically, earns its theological acclaim in precisely how Christ's exit from this world impacts *this world and our lives*.** Even through His physical withdrawal from our created world, Christ's ascension serves as a vehicle through which Jesus continues the work of ushering the kingdom of God into the realm of creation!

And, perhaps surprisingly, Calvin is one of those who most eloquently reminds the church of God's gracious promise made known in the Ascension of Jesus Christ. Calvin writes:

From this (Christ's ascension) our faith receives many benefits. First it understands the Lord by his ascent to heaven opened the way into the Heavenly Kingdom which has been closed through Adam (John 14:3). Since he entered heaven in our flesh...in a sense we already "sit with God in the heavenly places in him" so that we do not await heaven with a bare hope, but in our Head already possess it...

He therefore sits on high, transfusing us with his power that he may quicken us to spiritual life, sanctify us by his Spirit, adorn his church with divers gifts of grace, keep it safe from all harm by his protection, restrain the raging enemies of his cross and of our salvation by the strength of his right hand, and finally hold all power in heaven and on earth."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book Two*. Chapter 16.16.

The Ascension of Christ serves *us* in two ways. **As Jesus shared with us in our humanity, so too do we share in Christ's exaltation.** Calvin asserts that Jesus lifts *us* up in his ascent to heaven. Through Christ, *we* are presented before God; through Christ's Ascension we share in His heavenly inheritance as that which was closed off from us is now opened and is ours to receive. Through the power of the *ascended* Christ *we* stand triumphant – no matter how the limits or pains of this world pull us down. The fullness of our humanity is brought into communion with God through Christ's Ascension. And so we then know that even as we experience oppression and prejudice; even as we encounter, *still* the bondage of injustice and inequality; even as we witness natural disasters and man-made disasters we know that these limits, these injuries, *will not* and *do not* have the final say in our story. In Christ we are raised to new heights – as Christ prays for us and as Christ unites us to God. As one commentator writes: “In spite of our suffering and sinfulness, we are, in all of our humanity, held and valued and loved by God, in and through Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

And so then the converse is true, as Christ ascends into heaven, He creates a space for *us*, *in this life*, to partner with *Christ* in mission. When Christ's resurrected body leaves this earth, he makes way for the ***church* to become the body of Christ**. Christ will send the Spirit who will be counselor and guide for God's people as we go about the important work of **BEING God's people**. Jesus' final instructions to the disciples point us to this truth, for their charge is to continue Jesus' work – to proclaim the gospel of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus'

name; to extend the hospitality and love of God in Christ to all; to offer healing and mercy, shelter and forgiveness, a witness to God's amazing, radical justice made known to us in Jesus.

The Ascension is, quite surprisingly, very much about us – ***about our identity***. It reminds us that in spite of the limitations of our humanity, we are not only redeemed through Christ but called to be Christ's body, here on this earth. It also reminds us of the great, great love of God who *holds us to God's self, even as God sends God's love outward toward us and dwells within us*. The ascension reminds us, too, of **our call** – that we are to live as people of God here and now. We are not to merely anticipate a glad reunion in heaven and watch this world writhe in pain and wither away. *We are called* – we are **charged** – to be kingdom builders in *this* world even as we hope for the glory of the world to come.

In spite of the amazement of this Ascension story – we rejoice that this text does not leave us looking up. We do not stand still with eyes transfixed on the clouds sweeping over the space above which Christ's feet had flown. We do not stand frozen in a “good-bye” as Christ's resurrected body departs this world, and nor do we do not stop our lives and search for Jesus, *somewhere, out there*. This passage sends us, with the disciples back to our cities, back to our temples and churches, back to our *lives*. We are sent back not looking up, challenged to look both ***inward and outward***. We are challenged to see how the reality of the Ascended Christ may transform our identity as God's people and our understanding of our call. We are sent back so that we, too, might proclaim the powerful, radical, merciful love and to worship God together. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> McClure, John. Found in Textweek.com