

## **May 24, 2020 (Ascension Sunday) | Sanctuary worship service**

**TEXT:** [Luke 24:44–53](#)

**TITLE:** **Raised Hands**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

For weeks now, we have been incredibly aware of our hands. We wash them carefully, remembering to scrub the wayward thumbs and under the fingernails. We notice what they've touched and we remind ourselves not to let them come near our eyes, nose or mouth. We hide them in gloves. We use them to wave to people from a safe distance. And we fold them in prayer, asking God when this pandemic season might end so we can use our hands to embrace friends, neighbors, and loved ones again.

We are also noticing other people's hands. We wonder what they have been touching as we avoid shaking hands. We imagine extending out our arms, just as we picture others extending their arms toward us without the two sets of hands touching in order to carve out a safe distance between us.

I'm mentioning hands because they are a focal point in today's scripture about Christ's ascension into heaven. The last thing Jesus did on earth was raise up his hands—lift them in a blessing for his disciples, the women and men huddled around him on that hilltop outside the village of Bethany. And honestly, it is easier to focus on just a part of the ascension event—on something like Jesus' hands—rather than try to comprehend Jesus' ascension in its entirety. Or even worse, to try and reenact the ascension for an audience.

The story is told about a church that preformed an annual Easter cantata on the stage in their fellowship hall. This drama culminated in the ascension of Christ. As soon as the actor playing Jesus said the line "Lo, I am with you always," he was to be slowly hoisted out of view while completing the verse with the words "even to the end of the age." The upward flight was going smoothly until the stage crew briefly lost grip of the rope and the actor dropped back to the stage. As his feet dangled inches from the floor and his bewildered disciples looked on in horror, the actor remained in character and calmly said, "Oh, and one more thing: Love one another." Immediately the rope yanked him up into the ceiling and out of sight.

As I mentioned, trying to comprehend the ascension event in its entirety can be overwhelming. In Luke's gospel, we already have resurrection stories that are hard to picture and impossible to reenact: Jesus disappearing from the table of the disciples in Emmaus, or Jesus appearing in the upper room even though the disciples were meeting behind locked doors. The risen Christ apparently came and went during those days after Easter in ways that defy easy explanation. Luke is just fine with that and doesn't bother with giving us any information beyond the bare facts.

In a similar way, Luke goes on to describe Jesus' ascension. It is how he closes out his gospel in preparation for his next volume, the Acts of the Apostle. The ascension establishes a line of demarcation between life with Jesus and life after Jesus for the

Christian church. Basically Jesus had to leave the scene so that the church can pick up where the story left off. The theologian Karl Barth would have us think of it this way: The ascension marks a dividing line in how we think about the history of the world—a transition from the time of revelation when Jesus walked on earth to our time including right now.<sup>1</sup>

Given all that, it is right to focus on the last thing Jesus did while on earth: He raised his hands and blessed his disciples. How appropriate! He had already shown himself to be a king—the Lord over life and death resurrected from the grave. He had revealed himself as a great prophet after the example of Moses and Elijah—teaching God’s own wisdom about justice and righteousness. Now Jesus’ final act was that of a priest – a servant of God blessing God’s children with words of comfort. The most famous priestly blessing in the bible comes from Numbers 6, and it is still spoken in both churches and synagogues today: *The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord’s face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord’s countenance be lifted up upon you and give you peace.* (Numbers 6:24-25)

It is a prayer and a promise: May God keep you, be gracious to you, and give you peace now and always. It is a blessing spoken when a pastor places her hand gently on a baby’s head. It is a blessing said as Presbyterian elders lay two hands on a person’s shoulders when he or she are being confirmed or ordained to church office. It is a blessing pronounced with raised hands extended over a group like a benediction—a word of grace and hope going from one heart to a group of beating hearts, connected across space by the power of God’s Holy Spirit. Think about when a child goes off to college or loved ones leave after a visit. You raise your hand to wave goodbye and then you keep it in the air as if you are trying to stay connected with those you love who are leaving your sight. That type of blessing is what Jesus did before he ascended.

I can well imagine that the disciples also raised their hands on that ascension day. Maybe they raised them in surprise as Jesus left them. Maybe they reached out to try and hold Jesus back as he ascended. Maybe they extended them simply as a prayer of their own, seeking to stay connected with their Lord as long as possible. But at some point, they dropped their hands and stepped into the next chapter of their lives. They returned to Jerusalem. They worshiped in the temple. They waited for the gift of the Holy Spirit. But mostly they rejoiced—for the One who was dead was alive and by grace was with them forevermore.

How will we use our hands to navigate the coming weeks? They will still need to be washed regularly and we will be very cautious in what we touch, even as a time draws near when we can finally embrace one another once more. Our hands have been used to make phone calls to check on shut-in friends and distant relatives; that need will assuredly continue in the days ahead. Mahatma Gandhi said long ago, *you can’t shake hands with a closed fist*. The coronavirus season has revealed how interconnected our world is. Now is not the time for fists, for belligerence, demonizing others, military bluster or words of national distrust. If we hope to ever shake hands again, we have to begin by unclenching every fist.

In the weeks ahead, I can imagine there will be difficult moments as people make their voices heard from the margins; when people who have been furloughed actually lose their jobs for good; when landlords can once more evict for non-payment of rent; when families whose meager savings were depleted these past weeks now find themselves financially vulnerable to an unexpected car repair or hospital bill. Hands will need to be extended to help them out, to help them up off the ground, and to remind those in power that our siblings in Christ are in need and something must be done for all of us.

Some people have been shouting recently about the need to protect our basic rights in this American democracy—perhaps while also strapping on guns and angrily choosing to defy state government safety orders. Some have been quick to blame others—other races, other nationalities, other political parties. It is imperative that the lessons of non-violence taught to us by Dr. King, Fannie Lou Hamer and others guide us in the days ahead. Back in February of 1960, a non-violent campaign was held to integrate the discriminatory lunch counters in Nashville, Tennessee. Students, led by the Rev. C.T. Vivian, sat quietly at counters waiting to be served while white hoodlums poured ketchup on them or crushed lit cigarettes into their necks. At one point a white boy punched Rev. Vivian as he knelt in prayer. A student raised his fists to retaliate when Vivian shouted, “Put your hands in your pockets!” and the young African American student obeyed. In time, the sit-ins ended segregation in Nashville. Sometimes the strongest hands of blessing are those that remain in our pockets.

The brilliant educational pioneer Maria Montessori was guided by the simple saying: “What the hand does, the mind remembers.” Hands-on learning is not just a method; it’s an entire philosophy. And what works for classrooms also works for lives of faith. Notice your hands and how you use them in the days ahead. Unclench your fists. Reach out to help. Just as Christ’s final act on earth was to raise his hands to bless us, may we do likewise. It is a little thing—a tiny detail in a much larger story; a small gesture in a world of incredible needs and challenges. But trust that it is enough. Christ still raises his hands toward us as a blessing and a commissioning. It’s got to be an important gesture and one we should imitate, since he has the whole world in his hands.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Karl Barth, Dogmatics in Outline, pp. 124-5.