

Sunday, May 17, 2026

Ascension Sunday

Pastor Sue McNicol – Aldersgate UMC

Butte, MT

Scripture Reading: Luke 24:44-53 – The Living Bible

⁴⁴Then he said, “When I was with you before, don’t you remember my telling you that everything written about me by Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must all come true?” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand at last these many Scriptures! ⁴⁶And he said, “Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah must suffer and die and rise again from the dead on the third day; ⁴⁷and that this message of salvation should be taken from Jerusalem to all the nations: *There is forgiveness of sins for all who turn to me.* ⁴⁸You have seen these prophecies come true.

⁴⁹“And now I will send the Holy Spirit upon you, just as my Father promised. Don’t begin telling others yet—stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven.”

⁵⁰Then Jesus led them out along the road to Bethany, and lifting his hands to heaven, he blessed them, ⁵¹and then began rising into the sky, and went on to heaven. ⁵²And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem filled with mighty joy, ⁵³and were continually in the Temple, praising God.

Sermon: Skyward or Inward...



We have now journeyed through the forty days of Easter, the days following Jesus’ resurrection where he returned to walk and talk and teach and break bread with his followers. He has delivered his final

commandment as written in Acts 1:4-5 which reads: *While staying with them, he ordered them*

not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." He then goes on to give a mandate to the disciples (Acts 1:8) *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* And then he ascends into heaven.



For many of us, this entire scenario as it's described in the scriptures, unfolds like the closing scene of a major motion picture. Big billowing clouds everywhere, not unlike the storm clouds we've experienced, loved ones gathered around anxious and in disbelief, and a larger-than-life Jesus suddenly floating upward. How we relate to biblical teachings and assimilate God's message is a very personal experience and draws on our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. During the period in which Luke's gospel were written, around 70 AD, the belief was the our earth was flat and heaven resided on the other side of a thin veil of clouds. So, the Ascension story scripted in today's gospel fits with first century understanding. Now that we have traveled above the clouds and ventured far into space, we have a much different understanding of heavenly states and earthly existence. So how do we come to understand the Ascension story today? That depends on our individual experiences and collective understanding of God's existence through the human Jesus.



Take for example the individual experience of our founder John Wesley. As Methodists, we look to Aldersgate Day - May 24, 1738 - and the special meaning it holds. It is the commemorative date of when Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed," or the day of his transformative spiritual ascension.

John Wesley struggled with the same plight as the disciples: a lack of faith. For some time, he gazed skyward for the answers to fulfill his unbelief. However, as Martin Luther's sermon "Preface to the Romans" was recited, John Wesley's heart ascended into the presence of God. Wesley writes,

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

Not long after this experience did John Wesley begin to live out his transformative ascension. He was a witness of the faith, and through his life, he became a witness for Jesus throughout the ends of the earth.

Does ascension simply refer to rising above and moving beyond the current state of ones being? Looking skyward? Or does it also refer to transcending our current position (metaphorically speaking) and opening ourselves to deeper experiences...such as the inward transformation described by Wesley as a "heart strangely warmed?"



When I struggle with articulating a theological concept or message, I sometimes go to my most trusted source of understanding. Kids! How would I explain Ascension Sunday to our Young Theologians at Aldersgate? The first challenge that comes to mind is how do we explain heaven, or living with God, or earthly departure to children? When someone dies, we quickly say, "he or she is in heaven now." But does that just once again create the motion picture version of our loved one ascending into the clouds. What would it mean to a child if we were to explain Jesus' departure from earth as he is no longer with us physically, to be touched or seen, but he is with us in other ways? He's in our stories, our memories, all the different traditions we celebrate. He is with us in our thoughts, offering comfort when we feel anxious or scared. Helping us to believe in ourselves and believe in the goodness of other people. He's with us in a different way...but in a way that helps us to grow. As we become older, we understand how people are in our lives to help us be the best person

we can possibly be. Sometimes, they leave us before we feel fully ready to be on our own, but because they have been in our life, we are never really without them. They are a part of us.



This is what Jesus was saying to his disciples...he was letting these still confused, doubtful and anxious followers know they were “growing up” in their faith and understand and they’d be okay if he were no longer physically with them. He is pushing them to look inward and respond to the call to be the “church.” A church that not only follows Jesus in the sense of listening to his teachings, but also succeeds him, carrying on his life and work “to the ends of the earth.”

Theologian Oliver O’Donovan sums up the Ascension story for us as believers: *“All we can say is that the transition has occurred, that there is a beaten path that lies before us, linking our physical existence to an existence in the presence of God which lies beyond its conditions. We cannot see the path -- the cloud which hid Jesus on the mountain-top is a veil for that which cannot be comprehended from below -- but we know that the path has been taken, and that we are to take it too.”*

The ascension narrative reminds us the Christian story is not over... in fact it’s forever beginning anew. Next Sunday we celebrate Pentecost – the arrival of the Holy Spirit – a day when the church is rebirthed with the grace of God. However, today we are reminded to focus on our spiritual journey and what it means to us personally to be in a relationship with God. Is not your heart strangely warmed? We may look skyward for God’s guidance at times, but we also know God resides in our inward presence as well. Let’s celebrate today as a gift...an opportunity to embrace our own personal understanding of Christ as our companion and fellow traveler. Let’s take a sabbath day and explore all the places and faces where we see God’s amazing light.

Go in peace this day to be a living joy for all to witness. Amen