

Sermon: "Present in Absence" by Rev. Rachel Knuth
Luke 24:44-53 (Ascension Sunday)
May 24, 2020

I.

Ascension Blessings to you this day. Before I begin this sermon, I want to pause for just a moment here to say how much I've missed you. I have truly missed being with you in worship, and seeing you in the church office during the week, and delivering the sanctuary flowers to those of you who are housebound, and I look forward to the day when I can see you again in person. At the same time, I am really valuing the safe ways we can be in touch-- phonecalls, emails, texts, and Zoom. I mean, who knew that YouTube would become the way we gather for worship! I can count on one hand how many seminary classes I took on how to create and upload videos, host Zoom calls, and use imovie-- just kidding, I can count on zero hands how much I learned about technology in ministry. But, our screens are one way we can safely gather right now. So, here we are, the Body of Christ, striving to be the church in a pandemic, and learning new tools to connect. I miss you. And I'm glad you're here, engaging this worship video playlist for Ascension Sunday.

Ascension Day was actually this past Thursday, but we usually celebrate it the Sunday after. Ascension is when we remember that Jesus is lifted up into heaven, he ascends. His earthly ministry has ended, and his departure prepares the way for the Holy Spirit to come down at Pentecost. Jesus goes up, and 10 days later, the Spirit comes down. Technically, Ascension includes both the movement of Jesus up into heaven, and this 10-day interval before the Spirit rushes down at Pentecost. This week as I was praying and thinking about Ascension theology, I realized that the Catholics and Episcopalians totally know how to get their Ascension groove on. Also, the artists. [\[show 3 pieces\]](#) Ascension has been a popular theme among artists through the ages. From sculptures to stained glass, icons to surrealist paintings, artists have been attracted to the Ascension. In medieval times it was customary in churches to hoist a figure of Jesus up through the roof on Ascension. But, I have to be honest with you, I did not grow up celebrating the Ascension, other than when we recited the Apostle's Creed, and said together, "On the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." That was pretty much it: "He ascended into heaven." When our Worship Team met this week, we realized that the index in the back of our very own hymnal doesn't even list Ascension. So what do the Catholics, Episcopalians, and artists know about Ascension (that we don't), and how might this special holy day in our faith inform us during a pandemic?

II.

Since Easter, we have been hearing the stories of how the resurrected Christ appears to the disciples-- to the women, to Thomas, on the road to Emmaus, and grilling fish for breakfast by the lake. And just when the disciples must think this is the "new normal," Jesus blesses them and is lifted up into heaven. He's just... gone. All the physical ways the disciples were accustomed to knowing Jesus disappears along with him up into the clouds. And then, for ten days, there is no Presence-- just absence. (pause) In this time of pandemic, we are learning what absence feels like. I wonder if, in that window of ten days, the disciples, ever get tired of the "news reporters" saying how "unprecedented" a time they live in. In our church, there are elders among us who have seen their share of economic depression, war, earthquakes, and social upheaval. And there are middle schoolers among us who have already lived through terrible fire seasons, floods, gun

violence, and now-- a pandemic. I'm not sure what the Aramaic word for "unprecedented" is, but I do know that living in an in-between, "unprecedented" moment in history is not easy. Maybe you feel this way too right now, that before the wild and holy Spirit rushes in at Pentecost, other spirits seem to rush in-- the spirit of anxiety and worry; fear and grief. Are things going to get worse before they get better? Will there be a second wave of infection a few months from now? When will it be safe to ride a bus to get to work, eat at a restaurant, visit with grandchildren, fly on a plane? And not only questions, but also the feelings of incredible loss-- loss of income and financial security, loss of physical and emotional contact, loss of loved ones who have died and especially loss for families who haven't been able to hold the hands of the people they love as they take their last breaths, or gather for funerals. I can think of words to describe what it's like right now (heart-breaking, worrisome, lonely, disorienting)-- but "unprecedented" seems like a lame euphemism-- for both Ascension and life in a pandemic. It's a lame word because it describes an event that happens to you, not one that you have personal agency in-- or responsibility for. Nevertheless, Ascension and pandemic both occupy an in-between space, with a lot of unknowns, when major shifts are happening.

III.

In their shifting time, in their 10 days of absence, we might expect the disciples to be filled with anxiety. But surprisingly, the Gospel says they are filled with joy, and they spend their time in prayer. Part of me kind of resents them for being filled with joy during a time of disorientation-- shouldn't they be more frustrated, sad, angry, reactive, and grief-stricken? Many of us have felt all those things in the last few months. But, maybe the disciples finally get it. Maybe they model for us how to occupy the in-between, how to experience (through prayer and relationship with God) Holy Presence in absence. A friend of mine recently texted me and asked, "How are you doing during this pandemic shift?" And I have been so struck by the way she framed this time as a "shift." There's something hopeful about shifting our economy, our care for the environment, our political leadership, our ways of being in relationship. It sounds inspiring, and like we have an active role in participating in a pandemic shift, rather than passively suffering an unprecedented time. In verse 47, Jesus says that "repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." If Jesus were here, he might prefer to talk about a shift or change with the Greek word for "turn around," which we translate "repentance." The sign language for repentance is [do it]-- you take the letter "R", put your wrists together, and turn them around. Our pandemic moment may be a chance for us to get in right relationship with each other, our earth, and our world. And we can only start in Jerusalem, in the place where we are, in our very homes and hearts. Just like the disciples.

And what do we start with, how do we begin to live a life of repentance in a pandemic? When the days blur together, and we feel restless, and listening to the news is overwhelming, and we are disoriented-- when all of that is swirling around us, it turns out Jesus has some wisdom to get us through. Before he ascends, Jesus opens the minds and hearts of the disciples to scripture one last time. He says-- you have everything you need-- you have the law, the prophets, and the psalms. And he tells the disciples to "stay here." Does he mean-- stay here in Jerusalem? Or, could there be a dual meaning? Could Jesus also intend-- stay here with the law, the prophets, and the psalms? What if we do the same, and see what wisdom we might gather up from the law, the prophets, and the psalms?

First, the law.

One thing we can ground ourselves in from the law...is the importance of covenant. The Torah (law) is filled with covenants between God and the Israelites-- and these covenants are sacred, thoughtful promises about how to live and act in the world. In our pandemic shift, the law can inspire us to take time to re-visit and consider our Christian values, and to make thoughtful decisions based on values rather than emotion. This might look like a family brainstorming their values, writing them down, and posting them on the fridge so they can come back for direction when they feel ungrounded. It might mean realizing that we want to make small or large changes in our lives, to be aligned with what we believe is most important.

Second, the prophets.

From the prophets, we might be guided by... the importance of justice-- to release the former paradigms that aren't working, especially for the most vulnerable. Over and over again the prophets remind us to remember the poor, the widow, the orphan, those at the margins. In a time of social upheaval, there may be times in the near future, when we need to cry out for healthcare justice, equity for all students, and the dismantling of white supremacy upon which our country was founded. The prophets exhort us to pay attention and advocate for the vulnerable, and not only that, but to change the very systems that create gross inequality.

Third, the psalms.

The psalms remind us of...the importance of leaning into disorientation as a teacher-- to be patient with mystery and contradiction, within us and around us. There may be a rush to "return to normal." And I get that, I totally understand a longing for balance. But we also have to ask, "what is normal?" Is a 60-hour work-week "normal?" Is eating the cheapest meat possible, at the expense of the people who work in the meatpacking industry "normal?" Is the inequity in schools, health care, and housing "normal?" The psalms remind us to be ready to hold tension, to lean into the discomfort as we build a "better, new normal," and to ask, "What new thing is God calling out of us in this time of disorientation?"

IV.

The very last thing Jesus does before he withdraws into heaven is this-- he lifts his hands in blessing. He's actually mid-blessing when he is carried up, and I get the feeling he is blessing the disciples and the empty space created by his absence. These are the last verses of the Gospel of Luke, and it really does feel like a moment of benediction. Nowhere else in all of Luke, does Jesus give anyone or anything a blessing. It's like his whole life, up until now, has been a liturgy of love. And this moment, this blessing of ascension, is the benediction. So, in the spirit of blessing the in-between time of absence, I invite you to receive this Ascension-Pandemic Blessing:

May you lean into God's Presence when you feel absence.

May you ground yourself in the law, the prophets, and the psalms.

May you forgive someone.

May you make room for a shift "up" toward the heavens.

May you consider the possibility that "up" is not a literal direction, but a movement of your heart, of our church and society, to a higher way of being.

May you look for, and find, moments of joy. Amen.