

***“The Ascension”***  
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**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**May 28, 2017**

**Old Testament Reading: Psalm 47**

<sup>1</sup>Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.

<sup>2</sup>For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.

<sup>3</sup>He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet.

<sup>4</sup>He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom He loves. Selah

<sup>5</sup>God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.

<sup>6</sup>Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.

<sup>7</sup>For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm.

<sup>8</sup>God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne.

<sup>9</sup>The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; He is highly exalted.

**New Testament Reading: Luke 24:44-53**

<sup>44</sup>Then He said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” <sup>45</sup>Then He opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup>and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup>and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup>You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup>And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

<sup>50</sup>Then He led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, He blessed them. <sup>51</sup>While He was blessing them, He withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. <sup>52</sup>And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; <sup>53</sup>and they were continually in the temple blessing God.



**Sermon: *“The Ascension”***

This passage describes what the church has long called “The Ascension.” It’s the story of Jesus’ departure from his disciples following the resurrection. The ascension is another one of those stories of the Bible that can raise some questions if you think about it long enough. In the *Apostle’s Creed*, we acknowledge that Jesus “rose from the dead and ascended into heaven” where He “sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty.” But where did He physically go and how did He get there? The passage from Luke that we just read says “While He was blessing them, He withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.”

That image of Jesus rising into the sky has been a popular theme in art through the centuries. There’s a church in Black Mountain, NC whose stain glass window depicts this very moment. Except that with one hand raised in blessing, rising up from the earth, dressed all in white, that stained glass window actually makes Jesus look more like John Travolta from Saturday Night Live. Locals call this “Disco Jesus.”

From a first century, pre-scientific view of the natural world, it made sense for Jesus to go to be with God, He would have gone up into the dome of the heavens. I call it that because even though the Greeks had

developed astronomy centuries earlier, it was still held by most in Jesus' community that the earth was flat and that the sky was like a bowl turned over on top of the flat disc of the world. They had little understanding of the infinite universe all around them.

But as we've talked about over and over, the Bible is not a science text and the writers of scripture had precious little interest in researching and communicating accurate information about the world in which they lived. Here, Luke is trying to simply tell his audience that Jesus has gone to be with God. His physical presence among the disciples is no more.

Now, the story of Luke's gospel begins in the Jerusalem temple with the news that Zechariah, a temple priest will soon become a father. The story begins by generating anticipation in the reader. God is at work and something marvelous is about to happen. Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, in spite of her old age, will become pregnant and give birth to a son, John the Baptist.<sup>1</sup>

With this story of Jesus ascension, the author ends his story the same way. The disciples are sent back to the temple in Jerusalem to wait for something that is to come. The story ends where it began: God is at work and something marvelous is about to happen.<sup>2</sup>

So, the thing to focus on here is not the mechanics of flight and aerodynamics. It is looking forward to what will come next. Well versed in the Church Calendar as we all are, we know that next week is Pentecost. The day when we celebrate the coming of God's Holy Spirit upon the disciples and the early church. What we are to anticipate is that coming whirlwind of the spirit that enables and empowers and gives life to the people of God. But before Pentecost, Jesus sends the disciples back to Jerusalem to wait. Then He leaves them.

After Jesus departs, the disciples are faced with a long journey and an indefinite wait. They are essentially alone. Even though Easter has happened and through Jesus, God has conquered death, the world hasn't really changed all that much. The pre-Easter powers are still in control. The pre-Easter threats are still threats. There were a lot of reasons *why*, after Jesus leaves the disciples, that the fledgling Jesus movement could have just fallen apart. That the disciples kept going and didn't slink-off to hide somewhere says a great deal about their faith.

I saw trust and faith play out this week when I chaperoned Will Grey's school trip to Camp Willson, in a place I have been assured is correctly pronounced Bell-fountain, although it looks for all the world like it should be pronounced "*Bellfontaine*." While we were there I was in charge of ten sixth-grade boys, making sure they got-up on time, and made it to breakfast, took showers, brushed their teeth, stuff like that. Things that were a lot more challenging than one might think.

But I also got to watch Will Grey go down a zip line, an activity that was especially harrowing and rewarding at the same time.

Now, if you're unfamiliar with the concept, a zip line is a long wire that runs from a tall tower on one end, down to a point closer to the ground and some 200 feet away or so. The rider puts on a safety harness, connects that harness to a rig that is suspended from that wire, and then steps off the platform where gravity takes over. The rider goes zipping down the line on a fast and exhilarating ride. Like a roller coaster

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:5-25, NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Craddock, Fred. Luke. Pg. 294-5

that gets all its energy from the giant first hill, the zip line is fueled by gravity. The ride is a blast, but you have to start from a very high place. And so before the joy and excitement of the ride, comes the challenge of climbing up the tower.

The tower at Camp Willson is 25-30 feet high. The only way to get there is to climb. For the first ten feet or so, you climb up a ladder, leaned against what is essentially a telephone pole. Climbing up the ladder is easy. But then the landscape changes. No more rungs. Now we have hand and foot holds imbedded into the telephone poles directly. No more are we climbing at a more comfortable slope. Now we are going directly straight up.

There are lots of safety precautions. A person on the ground is holding the *belay* rope that is connected to your harness. That person is also connected by ropes to the tower itself. If you slip, you will not fall. You will merely dangle. But you have to keep going.

When you reach the top, you will be clicked into a second rope that is connected to the top of the tower. Now you are standing on that platform at the top of the tower, 25 or 30 feet up in the air. But you have to keep going.

The instructor at the top of the tower then unhooks the belay rope and hooks you directly into the zip line which is itself connected to the tower. You are still connected to two different safety ropes. Plus, the instructor is there and you can lean on her for support if you choose. She, too, is wearing a safety harness that is connected by ropes to the tower. But you have to keep going.

Then comes the moment of truth. You disconnect from the tower and it is only the zip harness and the reassuring words of the instructor to give you comfort. You have to step-off sometime. You have to keep going.

It is scary, yes. In spite of all the safety harnesses and procedures. In spite of the well-trained staff. You are still stepping off a thirty-foot tower into open air. This is not natural. But your success will completely depend on whether you trust everything that has been put in place to protect you.

Do you believe that you will remain connected to the harness, enjoying the exhilaration of flight, until you reach the end of the line and gently come to a stop mere feet above the ground? Or will you let fear overcome you? Will you let doubt stop you from going further? Will you keep going, or will you come back down the ladder? It's all a matter of trust, and faith.

There were 16 kids in the group. Probably 10 decided to zip and went through with it. Will Grey said it was the second-best thing he did at camp... right after horseback riding. But there were also a couple of kids who got in the harness, waited for their turn and even started up the ladder. But at the top of the ladder, when the challenge became more difficult, they just couldn't bring themselves to go any further.

And I understand. It was scary. 25-30 feet may not sound like a long way up, but it is. And not going through with it doesn't make those kids any less awesome than the ones who *did* finish the climb. But no matter how much encouragement came from teachers and classmates on the ground, no matter how safe the equipment was; no matter how calmly the instructor explained the process and showed how firm were the safety connections, some kids just couldn't make that transition from the safety of the ground to the joy of flying through the air. Because in between there was a harrowing journey and they simply couldn't make it.

That is the place where the disciples find themselves at this point in the gospel story.

Though Jesus was dead and is now alive; though the disciples and those who made up the early Christian community now had a direct experience of the power of God to defeat all comers – even the scourge of death itself – even so, the religious authorities who hounded Jesus and turned against Him were still in power. The Roman Empire, which had arrested, tried, and executed Jesus as a traitor, still stood astride the known world like a Colossus. The disciples were still essentially a fringe movement of Judaism, itself a smaller religion on the world stage.

And whatever confidence they had on Easter Sunday, might have been difficult to sustain as they watched Jesus' feet disappear into the towering bank of cumulonimbus above their heads. They had every reason to be afraid and cautious, and concerned. They had every reason to wonder if the hammer might fall on them next. So, what did they do? They turned and began walking for Jerusalem. They kept going.

You see, that is really the challenge of the life of faith, trusting that God is present and real and driving the course of history and that God is also walking with you as you play your little part in it.

The disciples would have been perfectly justified in going someplace safe. It would have been understandable if they had said "No thank you" to the whole affair. It would not have made them lesser people. It would not have changed who they were. I don't believe it would have lessened them in God's eyes.

But they kept going, in spite of the danger, in spite of the uncertainty, they kept going, even though Jesus was no longer physically with them. They kept going in anticipation of what God would do next, relying on the knowledge of what God had done in the past.

And that's important for us to remember as we face down our own journeys of faith. The world is a dangerous and frustrating place. We saw just how dangerous last week in Manchester.<sup>3</sup> But even that horrific night was only the most recent in a long sorry line of tragic, violent acts by extremist ideologues. Terrorism and violence are not new; and the innocents almost always pay the price.

Tomorrow we observe Memorial Day when we remember those men and women who have given their lives in war for our country. And even though we are thankful for their service and sacrifice, it is hard to escape the truth that, after how many millennia of human existence(?) we still haven't found a better way to solve our differences than by sending our sons and daughters into harm's way.

The world can be a frustrating and dangerous place and we are called to show God's love, and as Jesus says here, to "proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins" to it. As I look around, I can't help but feel like one of those sixth-graders standing on the ladder trying to decide whether or not I trust God enough to keep climbing.

We are called to love people but, people are not always or even very often easily loveable. We are called to serve people who sometimes either won't let us help them or who take our help when we're pretty

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<sup>3</sup> "The Latest on the Ariana Grande Concert Blast in Manchester." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 22 May 2017. Web. 30 May 2017. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/22/world/europe/manchester-concert-explosion.html>>.

sure they could be helping themselves. And we're called to help people in situations we don't understand and because of that, we sometimes do the wrong thing.

We are called to build, nurture, care, and befriend in a world where being vulnerable and reaching out to others can get you taken advantage of or worse.

We are called to be disciples when we don't always understand what that means and to be generous and give our lives, when it is so much safer to hunker down and never make eye contact, when it is so much more rewarding to keep what we have and enjoy the luxuries of enough and more than enough.

For the disciples, Jesus had gone, and the Holy Spirit had not yet come. In that in-between time of uncertainty, they had to trust; they had to keep going.

The disciples did not yet know the Spirit of God was soon coming upon them, but we have the benefit of history; we know how Luke's story ultimately ends; that the Holy Spirit has come upon us to empower us and guide us. But that doesn't change the fact that we still have to trust.

Like the sixth-graders I watched on the zip line this week, the next steps for you and I are hard. And they're scary. Even when we know the safety measures in place. Even when we know God is waiting to catch us if we fall, even when we know God is there beside us to remind us that we can; standing there atop that platform, the next step can seem like the longest one in the world.

No one will hold it against you if you don't take it.

No one will think less of you and God certainly won't love you any less.

But in order to take that awesome ride and to find the joy and exhilaration that awaits, you're going to have to keep going. That's what faith looks like. That's what Discipleship is.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.