

***This past Wednesday was the day the church celebrates the Ascension of Christ. 40 days after Easter, the church commemorates the Ascension of Christ into Heaven. Since we weren't together on Wednesday, we are looking at the Ascension texts today. And I know that we live in a world where people don't get carted off into the clouds. Or at least I don't live in that world. I have never seen someone ascending to heaven. But don't discount these texts because of that fact. The people for whom these texts were written came from a tradition of ascension. Moses ascended Mt Sinai and was gone 40 days, up in the clouds on the mountain, receiving the Law. And Elijah the prophet ascended up into heaven when his time as prophet was over. While these ascension texts don't fit into our 21<sup>st</sup> century world view very well, they fit the 1<sup>st</sup> century world view just fine. These texts connect Jesus with the traditions of Moses and Elijah, reinforcing his authority and his connection to the traditions of Israel.***

***The Books of Luke and Acts present us with slightly different versions of the same event, which is interesting considering they were written by the same person. In Luke's account, Jesus departs from them the same day of the resurrection. In Acts, he is with them for 40 days. I'm not going to try to fix that discrepancy. And, as we begin to study scripture together in our Year of the Bible, you will run into other illustrations of things in scripture not always being in agreement. Don't let that hang you up. God's word to us sometimes comes with discrepancies, with differences. Rather than trying to explain them away, I invite you to learn to live in the tension of no easy answers.***

***In any case, let's look at Luke's account first.***

***A few weeks back, I preached from the section immediately preceding this one. A few disciples were on the road to Emmaus and encountered Jesus as a stranger on the road. He later appears to the rest of the gathered disciples. And then Luke's account of Jesus' final goodbye follows immediately. The disciples minds are opened to understand the scriptures in new light.***

***Think about mystery novels you have read, or movies you have seen with complicated plots. Once you know the ending of the story, you can go back—read it or watch it again—and pick up on new things that you understand differently in light of your new knowledge.***

***That is how I would understand the way he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. Once they experienced him on the other side***

***of Easter, both the things he had told them and the things they had read in the Hebrew scriptures were to be understood differently. And armed with this new knowledge, they are called to be witnesses of what they have seen and heard and experienced in and with him. And then he is carried up into heaven. But the Ascension is not so much about the mystery of his being lifted up to heaven. Rather, it is about his "making space so the mission of the church can begin." (David S. Cunningham in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2 (WJK, KY 2008) p 522).***

***Because the followers of Christ have work to do. The church needs creating. They need to do their witnessing to the ends of the earth. But as long as Jesus is there among them, they are going to keep their eyes on him. They will continue to rely on him to guide and direct them. "Jesus ascension makes space for the disciples to turn their gaze upon the world." (ibid. 522)***

***We've spent the last 40 days in the celebration of Easter. And it is no surprise that we'd like to stay in Easter all year. This is the celebration of the church where we WIN! God conquers death itself! Take that, Roman authorities! Take that, powers of this world that tell us you're in charge! Take that, death! So, perhaps the Feast of the Ascension is a reminder to us that while we are Easter people, while we do live in the reality of the resurrection, we are called to do more than stand around doing the Easter dance.***

***To explore that a little more, let's switch to the Acts account of the Ascension.***

***Other than the 40 days discrepancy, the two accounts are similar. But Acts gives us some more details of the conversation. We hear what the disciples asked him—"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"***

***It isn't a ridiculous question. He's spent 40 days speaking to them about the Kingdom of God and the coming of the Holy Spirit. But his answer makes clear that they're facing the wrong direction. "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the father has set by his own authority. 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."***

***Stop worrying about that part of the kingdom, he seems to say and start worrying about this part of the kingdom. He then gives them some concentric circles of witnessing. If you aren't familiar with Holy Land geography, let me translate it into Idaho. "You will be my witnesses in Boise, in all of the United States and to neighboring countries like Canada, and then to all the ends of the earth." And when he finishes saying that, he was lifted up and a cloud took him from their sight.***

***Then the messengers show up. I don't think I would have liked these messengers much. At the end of Luke's gospel, they ask the women, as they've arrived at the tomb to anoint Jesus' dead body, "why are you looking for the living among the dead?" Well, duh. They weren't looking for the living. They'd come to the tomb because he was dead. Why should they have been expecting the living? What kind of a question was that?***

***And here, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward Heaven?" "Well, mister Angel smarty pants, if you didn't notice, Jesus just lifted up into the clouds. And while we've seen some crazy stuff with him, we haven't seen this before. That's why we're looking up toward Heaven."***

***I want to fully support the disciples in their looking up to heaven. Because I'll tell you right now—if and when any of you, or Jesus, ascend up to heaven in my presence, I will stand there staring until the soles of your feet have gone up into the clouds. They had already lost Jesus once before, remember. And here he was, leaving them again.***

***"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward Heaven?" "ummm...because we're scared. Because we don't have a script for how this is supposed to go. Because we don't know how to do this on our own."***

***"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward Heaven?" "Because it is easier than doing what he called us to do. If we focus on heaven, we don't have to notice the homeless, the hungry, the hurting who are here in front of our faces."***

***We haven't ever seen someone ascend to heaven, but the angels could ask us the same question.***

***Whenever Christians place our focus on looking for Jesus up in the clouds rather than doing the work of the church, we should ask ourselves, "people of Southminster, why do you stand looking up toward Heaven?"***

***For another perspective on what I'm talking about, listen to this song by Johnny Cash.***

***Come heed me good brothers come here one and all  
Don't brag about standing or you'll surely fall  
You're shinin' your light and shine it you should  
But you're so heavenly minded and you're no earthly good  
No earthly good you are no earthly good  
You're so heavenly minded you're no earthly good  
You're shinin' your light right and shine it you should  
You're so heavenly minded, you're no earthly good***

***If you're holdin' heaven, then spread it around  
There are hungry hands reaching up here from the ground  
Move over and share the high ground where you stood  
So heavenly minded you're no earthly good  
No earthly good, you are no earthly good  
You're so heavenly minded you're no earthly good  
Move over and share the high ground where you stood  
So heavenly minded, you're no earthly good***

***The gospel ain't gospel until it is spread  
but how can you share it where you've got your head?  
There's hands that reach out for a hand if you would  
so heavenly minded you're no earthly good.  
No earthly good, you are no earthly good.  
You're so heavenly minded you're no earthly good.  
There's hands that reach out for a hand if you would,  
so heavenly minded you're no earthly good.***

***No earthly good you are no earthly good  
You're so heavenly minded you're no earthly good  
You're shinin' your light right and shine it you should  
But you're so heavenly minded, you're no earthly good***

***So, like the disciples, we've been called to stop being so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good.***

***"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."***

***Previous generations of disciples have been Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth, even to Boise. And we are called, 40 days after Easter, to pick up that mantle ourselves.***

***Ascension is less about the physics behind getting Jesus up into the clouds and is more about the reminder that we're to stop looking up into the clouds and start looking around so we can do some earthly good.***

***So, how can Southminster do some earthly good? We already provide food and gas vouchers. We support our neighborhood school. We send 10 percent of our yearly budget to support missions near and far in the Presbyterian church. This next year, we're going to be re-imagining how we participate in the local community. We'll give you opportunities for involvement at the local level and we're looking for people who want to be a part of our Mission Committee, to dream up new ways to do some earthly good.***

***Randy is getting the Project Evergreen going, so we can become known in our community as a church that cares about creation, doing some literal earthly good.***

***The possibilities are really endless, because there are two more pieces of information in these texts to notice. One is that Jesus tells them to wait in Jerusalem until the Spirit comes upon them. We'll come together next Sunday to celebrate Pentecost—the day the Holy Spirit comes upon the church. The work we do as the church is led, empowered, and directed by the Holy Spirit. So the work we do to be some earthly good doesn't have to make us weary. It isn't about us. It is led by the Holy Spirit.***

***The second piece of information is that at the end of Luke's account, as Jesus is ascending, he is in the middle of blessing them. Which means his blessing doesn't stop. The blessing that Jesus is giving his disciples is still being given to us.***

***Even though we feel as if blessing is the last thing we deserve, it is actually the last thing we receive from Jesus as he ascends to heaven.***

Earthly Good  
Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-11

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Ascension, Year B

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***So, as we wait for the Holy Spirit to descend next week, live in the knowledge of this blessing. May it empower us to trust the Spirit and to go where she leads us.***