

May 16, 2021 Ascension of the Lord
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Acts 1:1-11, Psalm 47, Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53

[Using large pieces from Rev. Jane McBride's sermon for this date, some adaptations and much verbatim.

Quote from Osvolda Vena: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ascension-of-our-lord/commentary-on-luke-2444-53-6> Ideas from Barbara Lundblad: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ascension-of-our-lord/commentary-on-luke-2444-53-4>]

Beloved of Christ Jesus, in the name of the one who was, who is, who is to come. Amen.

Some of you jokingly, curiously, ask if my spouse Jane McBride and I share sermons.

She's the pastor at one of our neighboring churches, First Congregational United Church of Christ,
just across the interstate, and on Zoom and YouTube.

It's true, often we share ideas and sometimes quotes.

This week we're sharing liberally, really, I'm borrowing liberally, and with permission, for our ideas jived.

As some of you have heard, we moved last week.

Jane's mom scrubbed everything – the insides of cupboards,
the appliances, the bathrooms and window sills.

My mom, seriously handy, engineered all kinds of improvements—
new shelves, a set of drawers, hooks and nooks, galore.

The dads mowed and trimmed and hauled over our tools and compost piles.

Folks brought nourishing meals to feed the crew.

Now, the kitchen is fully functional.

Books are on shelves, beds are made, storage bins are stowed away.

Jane has been transplanting perennials.

We've hung our pictures on the walls, and met a few of the neighbors.

The school where our youngest attends,

the playground, and a beautiful schoolyard garden are all right across the street.

We're settling in and feeling at home.

And yet, we're lingering in a liminal season,

living in the space between one thing and another.

We still own the old place just 2 miles away, a mere 6 minutes.

Our house of 19 years will go on the market soon, perhaps next weekend.

Almost every day Jane goes over there to rescue some forgotten thing,

to connect with the handyperson who is helping us prepare the house for sale,

to water some new sod, to dig or weed.

Most days, she runs into our beloved next door neighbors.

Over and over again, we reminisce, and say our goodbyes.

When we venture inside the house, the grief and gratitude are overwhelming.

In their empty, echoey state, the rooms feel both intimately familiar
and foreign.

As the walls get repainted, our bright touches of mango and sky blue

are replaced with a nice shade of gray, similar to a great many other houses on the market.

All the pesky, accumulated broken stuff is being repaired,
all the scuffs of wear removed.

It feels as if all our years there are slowly being erased.

And yet, we're part of the house.

We have added to the joys and sorrows that season the old woodwork,
to the memories and stories that linger in the corners,
that give the place character, even soul.

[Pause...]

The Ascension of Jesus is a festival,

a festival that always falls on a Thursday,
always the 40th day after Easter.

Some years we observe it on the following Sunday, like we are today.

Sometimes we breeze right passed, enjoying Easter, on our way to Pentecost.

In some ways, it's a problematic story.

It can be hard to relate to this scene of Jesus being dramatically
swept up into heaven.

More importantly, it just doesn't jive well with our sensibilities.

Scientifically speaking, we know that heaven is not located in the sky.

And, as we seek to de-colonize a faith that has reinforced
harmful hierarchies and dualities,

it's vital to rethink the idea that God is "up"

For many of us, the divine is interwoven with all of reality;
the holy is a dimension of the world.

Despite these challenges, or perhaps because of them, I'm intrigued by this story,

because of the way it honors our **liminal seasons**,
giving us both comfort and wisdom as we navigate them.

The disciples were away from home, in Jerusalem.

They had come to the city to celebrate Passover with Jesus.

During that time, Jesus was arrested and crucified, then resurrected.

He appeared to the women at the tomb,

then to the disciples walking to a nearby village,

and finally to his followers gathered in Jerusalem.

They knew him by his wounds, by his peace.

They recognized him when he blessed and broke and shared the bread.

He gave them new knowledge, a new perspective, to interpret scripture

to understand what God was doing among them.

And now he's leaving them once again, with a blessing,

and the promise of power "from on high".

What a whirlwind. Can you imagine that roller coaster of emotions?

Jesus tells the disciples, right before his departure,

that they should stay in the city until they are "clothed with power from on high".

Remember how I said that Ascension is always on a Thursday, always the 40th day after Easter?

Pentecost, the coming of the Spirit, and the forming of the church, happens on day 50.

On the church calendar, this space of waiting between one thing

and the next is clear and exact – precisely 10 days.

In retrospect we know this, but the disciples... they had no idea how long

they would need to remain in Jerusalem,

away from home, away from their daily lives.

And they really had no idea what it was they were waiting for.

What would this power feel like?

How would they know it had come?

What would they be able to do with it?

There are many ways we experience liminality – time and space between.

When we are grieving a loss,

when we are navigating changes in relationships, or work, or school.

When a diagnosis looms, filling the future with uncertainty.

When experiences of beauty or pain

jolt us from our usual patterns of thinking and feeling.

Collectively, we're in the midst of overlapping liminal seasons—

the pandemics of COVID-19, and racial reckoning, and climate change.

Uncertainty is a key characteristic of liminality.

Should we mask or not mask? Sing or not sing?

Do we eat together or refrain from doing so?

Will enough people get vaccinated to enable us to reach herd immunity?

When will our littlest ones be eligible for the vaccine?

What does true public safety look like?

What is the path that can lead us toward the radical transformations needed so desperately?

There's a second liminal season implied in the story of Jesus' ascension.

Jesus has left. When is he coming back? Is he coming back?

What happens if he doesn't return?

Biblical scholar Osvaldo Vena, observes:

"Luke seems to be making narrative and theological space for the birth of the church."

In other words, that liminal zone of Jesus' bodily absence

allowed the community to take on his mission.

Though he was gone, physically, the gift of Pentecost would be that

that same Spirit, that same power,

that had animated Jesus, now fills his community

And that's still true.

Some liminal seasons are relatively permanent.

We're still living amid this liminal time and space we call church.

Though we never fully understand how, we are Christ's body, his hands, his heart.

We are fallible and fragile and yet we do Christ's work.

We heal and teach and liberate.

Among us, and through us, God brings life to the dead

and hope to the despairing.

Next Sunday we'll take another step in this liminal journey of worshipping during COVID.

On Pentecost, May 23rd, and every few weeks or more through the summer,

some of us will worship in person outdoors, weather permitting.

We'll use the west parking lot, for it is flatter and gives a little more space to spread out.

Even while some choose to worship together outside,
others will opt for Zoom or YouTube.

This new adventure as we begin to come back together into one another's presence
will be a liminal time in a year plus of liminal times.

We'll need all the grace and respect we can muster,
honoring our individual decisions to come or not,
honoring our policy that—at least for now—asks us to still wear masks,
to keep our distance, to opt for waves and simple bows rather than hugs or handshakes.

I know this will be hard, for emotions are big, this is a liminal time.

At Jack Parry's funeral this week, I caught myself leaning in to hug some of you.

I shouldn't have done that!

I say this as a reminder that we—we all—need to honor our policy.

We all need to honor one another's varied comfort levels.

Next week many will be together outside and many, I suspect, will opt for a slower return and still use Zoom
and YouTube, at least for a while. That's okay.

Some weeks, like May 30ths, we'll all use Zoom and YouTube.

These are liminal times, liminal spaces.

After Jesus' ascension, the disciples, Luke says,

“returned to Jerusalem with great joy and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

Jerusalem was a place of birth, the place where it all began,

where the infant Jesus was blessed by the elders Simeon and Anna in the temple.

And Jerusalem was a place of conflict and torment and the deepest grief imaginable.

And Jerusalem was a place of rebirth.

Like when we step into our old house, Jerusalem was all of that wrapped up, like our old house,
a place of loss and gratitude, joy and sorrow.

In this liminal time

may new life find you, fill you,

may grace be a balm in the uncertainty,

may the Spirit's presence be your guide, your path, your peace. Amen.