

“Open Minds See and Believe”

Message by DD Adams

Ascension Sunday

Providence United Methodist Church

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Today’s gospel lesson is taken from the book of Luke, chapter 24, verses 44 through 53. I’ll be reading from the *Common English Bible*. Jesus 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 from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. He said to them, “This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

Look, I’m sending to you what my Father promised, but you are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power. “He led them out as far as Bethany, where he lifted his hands and blessed them. As he blessed them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem overwhelmed with joy. And they were continuously in the temple praising God. This is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God. Let’s pray. Lord bless the reading, hearing, and understanding of your word today. Open our heart and minds to believe and see you at work in our lives. Let your presence be felt and acknowledged and praised. Amen.

Today is the day we celebrate Ascension Sunday. Officially it’s celebrated on a Thursday and comes 39 days after Easter Sunday. It commemorates the bodily Ascension of Jesus into heaven. In the Eastern Church it’s important and right up

there with Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost on the Christian calendar. In the Western Church, it seems to come and go without much attention given to it.

When you stop and think about it, the Ascension of Jesus is difficult to comprehend—with Jesus floating up into the sky. It's a challenge to contemporary thinking, but there's really nothing more difficult about Jesus returning to heaven than to understand our Lord's condescension. Meaning—Jesus came down to our human level. The word condescension is usually understood as one who speaks down to you and considers him or herself superior. For someone to be truly condescending, they must be great in the first place, and we're the beneficiaries.

Jesus lived for 33 years, he died, was buried, resurrected from the dead, ascended into heaven, and promises to come again in the same way he left. Christ lowered himself and came down to us in human form—that's the condescension of Christ. He died for the sin of the whole world, and then ascended to his Father. Truly, one's heart and mind must be touched by God to believe and understand the scriptures.

Luke gives special attention to the ascension as none of the other gospel writers do. His gospel ends with the Ascension and adds more detail to it when he continues writing in his historical account in the book of Acts. Luke makes an essential link between his gospel and the preaching of it in the Acts of the Apostles.

In Acts 1, Jesus was speaking to the disciples. As he was lifted up, a cloud took him out of their sight, and they were staring toward heaven. Suddenly two men in white robes stood next to them. They said, "Galileans, why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven."

Imagine *yourself* as a disciple for a moment. Jesus has just explained the scriptures one more time to you. He states that everything from the Law from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Jesus reminds you what is written. That “the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

If I heard my best friend, my leader, and the worker of miracles say he was going to leave; I would’ve grabbed his feet on the way up into the air and then fell to the ground hoping to keep him on earth! But that’s not what the disciples did. They worshipped him, returned to Jerusalem, and were overwhelmed with joy. They were continuously in the temple praising God. They understood that the ascension of Jesus was an announcement of the fact that he was coming again! Surely their hearts and minds were touched to believe, understand, and see things differently.

Numerous times through Jesus’ earthly ministry he’d told them of his departure. He said he would send a Comforter—the Holy Spirit. Those who opened their minds to believe would “. . . receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon [them]” (Acts 1:7). So it made sense to the disciples now. They weren’t going to be alone forever. Jesus was coming back!

The take away and the so what of this Ascension Sunday message is this. Jesus left us. His work on earth was complete. His birth, death, resurrection, and ascension marked a brand new era in world history—all of which hold a central importance to our Christian faith. By Jesus leaving, he sends the Holy Spirit—the Comforter.

We’ve not been left alone. Jesus walks with us through every dark valley in our lives. He’s seated at the right hand of God. He hears our prayers, perfects them

according to his perfect will, and then performs our prayers. Since Christ ascended to his Father, he's interceding for us as Romans 8:34 states. "It is Christ Jesus who died, even more, who was raised, and who also is at God's right side. It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us." We have Christ interceding for us on our behalf 24/7.

We know Christ has endured every kind of struggle. He's never indifferent to what we go through; he's fully involved and praying for us. And the good news is that this earthly life is not all there is. Our loved ones are waiting for us on the other side. *They've* already gone through all of their struggles in this earthly life, but we must carry on—carry on—and lean on the strong arm of the Lord.

And as we lean on God's strong arm, God opens our minds and increases our understanding. When the disciples were spending time with Jesus before he was taken up into heaven, ". . . he opened their minds to understand the scriptures." There's something freeing about that—something that's liberating.

When our minds are open to believe the truth our sadness can be replaced with joy. Just as the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy, despite the departure of their best friend, they took heart, and understood Christ was with them. Oh I'm sure there was a note of sadness, because they'd miss him, but they understood what was set before them. They would carry on and be Christ's witnesses. Christ was coming back!

So open your heart and mind. Believe the words of God. Christ *is* coming back, but until then, allow yourself to be comforted by the Comforter. Extend a word of encouragement to someone, and take heart, Christ is with us through every trial and all of our suffering. We're not alone. Let's pray. God who is everywhere, all at once, and at the same time present with us, remind us to acknowledge you.

Move in us to pray—to pray often and to believe all you've said to us in your word. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.