



Sermon for the Ascension Sunday of Easter, May 2020

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Acts 1:6-14](#) [Psalm 68:1-105,33-36](#) | [Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11](#) [John 17:1-11](#)

Awake, friends! Stir yourselves. Come to the place, this last place, with the risen Christ Jesus. Alleluia, friends, Christ is risen, and now, Christ is taken on high. Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, is drawn in all his humanness into the very heart of God. And so, Jesus ascends. "Let all the world in every corner sing, 'My God and King!'"

So. And, here we are, standing, looking heavenward. What do we make of it all?

It is Memorial Day weekend here in the United States, and this year we are greeted with 100,000 dead so far from the coronavirus that continues to claim lives across our land and across the world.

Where is God? Where is Jesus the Lord of Life?

When I was younger, the greatest challenge I faced was working with adults my age and older who had debilitating forms of mental illness that had kept them cycling in and out of hospitals. I worked on a therapeutic farm with these residents, and lived on the farm with them and shared meals with them and heard their minds and hearts cry out with confusion and yearning and distortion, day after day.

The church where I worshipped then had a beautiful stained glass window depicting the ascension. And, when we got to Ascension Day and the subsequent Sunday, and then for weeks and months after that, I found myself wrestling with the question, "Where has Jesus gone?" And, another question, "Where is God for these people who are so torn apart in their own minds?"

I had had a beautiful vision at one point of the Holy Spirit as God's presence that flowed between people and within them, making them whole and bringing them to their full selves that they were created to be. But then, I worked with people who experienced longterm, enduring psychoses – a fracturing of wholeness, like a mirror broken in shards and twisted so

that what they saw was a world, and a self, that didn't make sense. Where was the Life-giving Holy Spirit in this?

We face questions like this throughout our lives, as we come face to face with suffering, with pain, with injustice.

We face questions like this, now. And the questions grow, and the sorrow and confusion and pain behind them will increase. The world is not what we thought it was. It has been changed for us – so quickly, so suddenly.

We come to the end of Easter Season in 2020 with confusion, uncertainty. Yes, alleluia, Jesus is risen, and we sing alleluia. And now, we come to that time when Jesus leaves. Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, ascends out of sight. Like the first followers and friends of Jesus, we are left standing, staring up, wondering where he has gone and what we are supposed to do now. And, maybe, wondering why he didn't stay to make all things right and restore the world.

What we forget is that Jesus rose and for a while kept appearing to his beloved followers, but meanwhile all around them life continued as before. Injustices continued, as Rome continued to crucify people it deemed as criminals, as wealthy landowners mistreated the poor who were in their charge. Poverty, and illness, and the daily challenge of seeking and finding daily bread – all these were still there, all around them. Yet, Jesus was risen from death and was with them again.

So, naturally, the disciples' hopes began to spark again, for Jesus to step into the role they hoped for him – to be the Messiah they imagined, to be the One who would fix everything. Before he goes, the disciples ask in hope, "Is this the time when you will restore everything? Will our hopes for God's promises be fulfilled? Will it all finally make sense, the way we hoped and dreamed it would always make sense?"

Jesus' final words to them turn it all around. He says, "It's not for you to know when things will happen. But, you WILL receive power from the Holy Spirit, and you will be my witnesses here, and there, and everywhere." Jesus is saying, knowing the future and having some clear course or plan is not the power you seek, and it's not going to bring the kingdom of God. Jesus is saying, there IS power coming, and it will carry you forward in ways you never expected and to places you never expected. Don't look for control. Look for the coming of the Holy Spirit!

Then, he is lifted up. And the disciples are left standing – amazed, grateful, awed...and wondering what to do next.

So, they get a little prompt. Two messengers – like the two messengers at the empty tomb – come with a promise that this same Jesus will come again.

So, then they returned to the city. To their room. To their shelter. And there, they prayed. Constantly. They waited in readiness, eagerness, and enduring hope in the promise of the Holy Spirit. They continued to open themselves to God, so that God would move them and stir them and light them on fire for the sake of the whole world.

Friends, how shall we be in this odd time that we face in the world today? How shall we face the uncertainty of the future ahead of us – as people, as a city, a region, a state, a nation, a world – as a church, as individuals?

We do not need to face these days with dread, smothered in the anxiety of all that comes at us. We also do not need to face these days with our heads in the sand, pretending to ignore everything around us.

We can be realists who face these days with eyes wide open but also with eyes on Jesus and with arms open wide as we seek the coming of the Holy Spirit. We can face these days in prayer – in deep communion with the God of Life, the God of Love. We can face these days with hearts stirred by Christ to love each other as he has loved us and loves us still.

Read the Gospel passage from John again. Even though these words are from when Jesus was with his disciples before he went out to the Garden of Gethsemane and then was captured, tried, beaten, and crucified – now, here in the ending days of Easter season, at this time of the ascension, we can read them as Jesus' prayer to God for his followers and friends even as he is being lifted up.

“This is eternal life, that they may know you.”

“Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had in your presence before the world existed.”

“Now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.”

Jesus opens the gates now to eternal life for us, and we can know it and live it now. Eternal life is knowing God! So, when we open ourselves to God and seek to know God, when we embrace that truth that we are already thoroughly known by God – then, we taste eternity. Because, then, we are aware more fully that we are in God's presence and in God's eternal embrace. Eternal life is NOW!

Imagine living this way! If you knew, truly, that you were in God and with God fully, just as Jesus in all of his humanity, scars and all, has been taken up into the very heart of God, then how can fear hold you? And if the love of God has taken your heart, then how can you be more concerned about yourself than your neighbor? As Bishop Michael Hunn in the Rio Grande

region said, "The closer I walk with Jesus the less concerned I am about asserting my rights - and the more I'm concerned with loving my neighbor."

Pray, friends. Immerse yourselves in prayer and meditation on God's goodness, love, and power. Pray for healing for this world. Pray that we may all be open to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Pray in thanks and praise for Jesus who is the Lord of Life and Love. Pray that we may receive power to live and to give. And pray that we may be witnesses to the life-changing love of God.

Amen.