

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

May 16, 2021, Ascension Sunday/The Sunday of Easter

Psalm 47, Acts 1:1-11

Ascension Sunday, "...and sitteth on the right hand of God..."

This week as I've prepared for Ascension Sunday I've been thinking about the Apostles' Creed. I realized this week that another thing we've lost during these 15 months of the world pandemic is reciting the words of the Apostles' Creed together. I have miss the sound of our voices speaking these words of faith.

When our confirmation classes are learning the Apostles' Creed, I encourage them to hear the story of Jesus in its words. I often use motions with them, to help them remember it until they have it memorized. (Do with motions)

born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
he descended into hell;
the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

We normally stand when we recite the Apostles' Creed, so I invite you, as you are able, to stand where you are as we recite this together. You are welcome to use the motions I use with the confirmation classes. As we say what we believe, let us look forward with hope to the day we will say this together in this sanctuary, and let us trust that the Spirit of Christ unites our hearts as we confess together what we believe:

THE APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;

who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,

born of the Virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, dead, and buried;

he descended into hell;

the third day he rose again from the dead;

he ascended into heaven,

and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;

from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost;

the holy catholic church;

the communion of saints;

the forgiveness of sins;

the resurrection of the body;

and the life everlasting. Amen.

I have a feeling that for most of us the only time we think about Jesus' ascension into heaven is when we recite the Apostle's Creed together in worship.

In the life of faith, we talk a lot about what it means that:

Jesus died on the cross for us,

offering us the forgiveness of sins,

and three days later rose from death and left the tomb empty, for us,

with the promise of eternal life.

We spend a lot *less* time talking about what it means that 40 days after Jesus rose from death and left the tomb empty, he ascended into heaven as his disciples stood watching.

Jesus' ascension often gets left out of conversations about faith, when we talk about what Jesus did for us.

As we confessed in the Apostles' Creed:
Jesus is now back in heaven, at the right hand of God,
in the place of power in the Kingdom of God.

What the ascension means to me, first as a follower of Jesus Christ, and secondly as your pastor is this:

In Jesus you are known, and I am known, by our God,
who put on human flesh and lived on earth,
and then having lived our human life, returned to heaven for us.

We are truly known. Our humanity is known.
We are never alone.

We are loved by Jesus who understands first-hand what this life is like.
Jesus knows what it is like to celebrate our deepest joys
and to walk through the valley of the shadow of death.
Jesus knows what it is like to live with disorientation,
even the disorientation of a world pandemic.

Whatever it is that we carried into worship with us this morning:

whatever is scaring us,
whatever is making us feel like we are on the edge of tears,
whatever is bringing us great happiness,
whatever is going on in the lives of our loved ones that breaks our hearts, or brings us great joy,
whatever is waking us up at 2 a.m.,

Jesus understands and is with us. We are not alone.

We are loved by Jesus who understands our human lives,
and reigns in heaven,
loving us moment by moment as we live these human lives.

As we confess in the Apostles' Creed: Jesus now sits at the right hand of God; the place of power in the Kingdom of God.

And what we know about this Jesus who sits at the right hand of God for us?:

We know that he wept when his friend Lazarus died. He wept for himself and he wept for Lazarus's sisters Mary and Martha who were grieving. Jesus is with us when we say our goodbyes to those we love, our goodbyes to the pre-pandemic world, our goodbyes to thinking we have life figured out.

We can trust that Jesus waits in heaven, with arms open wide for our loved ones who are nearing Heaven's gates,

Just as Jesus will one day stand with arms opened wide to welcome us.

And what we know about this Jesus who sits at the right hand of God?:

We know that Jesus welcomed the sick and the dying and brought the healing they needed to their lives. This means that we can trust that Jesus is:

with our friends and loved ones in the hospital,
in the nursing homes, even when we can't visit them.
Jesus is with those who are dealing with chronic illness and terminal illness,

those who are waiting for medical answers,
 those who are living with depression and mental illness,
 and all of us who are slowly finding our way out of the world pandemic.

And what we know about this Jesus who sits at the right hand of God?:

We know that Jesus loved children. We know that when the disciples tried to keep small children away from Jesus so they wouldn't bother him, he stopped them. He said to the disciples and the parents of the children and the crowd: "Let the little children come to me, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to our children. Then he opened his arms wide and took the children on his lap and he blessed each one of them.

Jesus once said we are to care for the "little ones" because "in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 18:10)

In the midst of all our questions about how this world pandemic has affected our children and our teens,

the ascension of Jesus reminds us that he is in Heaven,
 loving, caring for and cherishing each one of our children and teens,
 as we journey beside them in this changed world.

As I thought about the ascension this week, I also realized that another gift of Jesus' Ascension to Heaven is that we already have some of the words that Jesus spoke while on earth, and now speaks to us from the right hand of God.

Jesus continues to speak to us from heaven saying the familiar words:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30

Jesus continues to speak to us from heaven saying the familiar words he once spoke near the end of his life on earth:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places (or "many mansions" as the old King James says). If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going. ...I am the way, and the truth, and the life." John 14:1-6

And Jesus continues to speak to us from heaven saying:

"...Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." John 14:27

These promises are for us, as we are in this in-between time of covid numbers improving, vaccinations being available to younger members of our families,
 and our community and church family beginning to find our way out into this changed landscape.

With all that this year has held, and continues to hold, I also find comfort in Paul's words in the 8th chapter of Romans. Paul was talking about the truth that God is always with us. He writes that the only one who could ever judge us, condemn us and separate us from God is Jesus, and as Paul reminds us, Jesus is the one who knows us, loves us, lived for us, died for us, was raised from death for us, ascended to heaven for us, and now prays for us in heaven. (Romans 8:31-34)

It is one of my greatest comforts that Jesus prays for us. How could we possibly ever pray everything we need to say, or even find the words that speak what our hearts are feeling sometimes? Especially in these times when there are

so many goodbyes,
 so much change and uncertainty,
 so much sadness and loneliness,
 so much division,
 and so much grief,

this Ascension Sunday invites us to hold onto the good news, and be comforted that Jesus is in Heaven praying for us.

And not only Jesus prays for us. Earlier in that same 8th chapter of Romans Paul says: “Likewise, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit prays for us with sighs too deep for words.” (8:26)

Or as the King James Version put it: The Holy Spirit prays for us with groans too deep for uttering” (KJV).

Finally, on this Ascension Sunday, the other words that bring us great comfort, also come from the 8th chapter of Romans, reading from the Message Translation:

“Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ’s love for us?

There is no way!

Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger,
 not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing,
 not even the worst sins listed in Scripture:

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us.

I’m absolutely convinced that nothing—

nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic,

today or tomorrow, high or low,

thinkable or unthinkable—

absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God’s love

because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.”

Romans 8: 34-35, 37-39

This is our Good News, “Jesus sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” Alleluia! Amen!

(cf: SER-10-05-16)