

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

June 2, 2019, Ascension Sunday (The 7th Sunday of Easter)

Psalm 47, Acts 1:1-11

DISCIPLES OF THE ASCENDED CHRIST

I'd like to start this morning's sermon with the Apostles' Creed. In a moment I'm going to ask you to stand and recite with me this foundational statement of what we believe. You will find it on page 35 at the very front of your hymnals, before the hymns begin. I invite you to turn to it now. We stand when we recite the Apostles' Creed because we are standing up for what we believe.

Let us stand together, as we are able, and name our faith together.

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 rose into heaven as his disciples stood watching.

Jesus' ascension often gets left out of conversations about faith,

and this week I've been thinking about why that is, and what it means that Jesus ascended into heaven for us.

As we confessed in the Apostles' Creed:

Jesus now sits on the right side of God,

in the place of power in the Kingdom of God.

What this 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 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.

Whatever it is that we carried into church 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 3 a.m.,

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

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

Another promise of Jesus' Ascension into heaven is the coming of God's Holy Spirit into our lives. As we will celebrate next Sunday on Pentecost, the very Spirit of God fills each of our hearts and lives as we follow Jesus.

As we read in John 14 last week God's Spirit reminds us of what Jesus has said and done,
and reminds us that we are not alone.

When we find ourselves in a difficult time and suddenly remember the words of a hymn or song that touches our hearts, or a scene in a movie, or a scripture verse, or loving comfort of someone from our past who loved God and loved us,

that is God's Spirit reminding us that we are not alone because God is always with us.

Or have you ever had the experience of thinking about someone and just knowing you need to call them or text them or email them? And when you call they say: "how did you know I needed someone?"

Or the flip side, have you ever been having a rough day
and had someone call you out of the blue, just when you needed it?

That is God's Spirit nudging us to care for each other, reminding us that our God knows us and cares for us always, and wants us to know that.

One of the great gifts of Jesus' ascension to heaven is the coming of the Holy Spirit into the hearts and lives of each of us who follow Jesus.

While there are many ways that Jesus' Ascension is part of our journey of faith, but the final one I want to focus on today comes from the 8th chapter of the book of Romans.

Paul was talking about the truth that God is with us always. He writes that the only one who could ever judge us, condemn us and separate us from God is Jesus.

But that is not who Jesus is.

Paul says: Who is to condemn us? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes, that is prays for us.

The one who knows us, loves us, lived for us, died for us,
was raised from death for us, ascended to heaven for us
now prays for us in heaven.

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 heart is feeling sometimes?

Especially in those times where there has been
too much death,
or too much sadness and despair,
or too much loneliness
or too much grief.

What a relief that Jesus is 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).

When we don't have the words to pray, when life has silenced us, God's Spirit is praying for us.

Jesus has gone before us into heaven, and prepared a place for us there. Meanwhile we keep living our lives here on earth, loved and held by our God who knows us completely and loves us completely,

And not only are we loved, but God, in Christ, and through the Holy Spirit, is praying for us.

Jesus has gone before us into heaven,
and now we are the disciples

called to follow our risen Savior here on earth,
as he loves and guides and prays for us from heaven.