

05.17.26 ~ Easter 7 –Ascension Sunday

“Why Did Jesus Ascend?” (anyway!)

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Words of Excitement

Psalm 47 ^{NIV}

Pew Bible 490

- ¹ Clap your hands, all you nations;
shout to God with cries of joy.
- ² For the Lord Most High is awesome,
the great King over all the earth.
- ³ He subdued nations under us,
peoples under our feet.
- ⁴ He chose our inheritance for us,
the pride of Jacob, whom he loved.
- ⁵ God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.
- ⁶ Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
- ⁷ For God is the King of all the earth;
sing to him a psalm of praise.
- ⁸ God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on his holy throne.
- ⁹ The nobles of the nations assemble
as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted.

Leader: These Are God’s Words of Exaltation.

People: Thanks be to God!

Words of Instruction

1 Peter 4:12-14, 19; 5:6-11 ^{NIV}

Pew Bible 1060, 1061

¹² Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. . . . ¹⁹ So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good . . .

⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

⁸ Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

¹⁰ And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast. ¹¹ To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Leader: These Are Glorious Words of Instruction!

People: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

God, you are the comforter, nurturer, and provider of all that we need. We proclaim it because Christ is still risen and present in our lives. Through his sacrifice, we are forgiven and saved for all eternity. We cannot see you, but we can feel your assurance, your correction, and divine guidance. We long to be in your presence, to feel wonder and experience the awe of the miraculous. Is that what we pray for this Ascension week? We ask you to help us enter into the areas of faith we do not understand: the pain, struggle, the testing, and the supernatural. Help us to open our minds and hearts to trust what we do not understand and to have peace. Please speak through these Scriptures, this message, and messenger. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Well, I hope you enjoyed our creative diversion last Sunday, reading from *The Tree That Survived the Winter* by Mary Fahy. I enjoyed sharing her perspective with you, and the Holy Spirit knew that we would require that reminder last week, as we celebrated the life of our dear friend and Congregant Mae Smith on Wednesday. Thank you to all who assisted with the service and lunch, both set up and clean up. We also handled lots of difficult congregation news during the week and weekend as you heard during our prayer time, so let me remind you that you all are a resilient bunch! We will get through this next season as well because of our faith. You have survived decades of change, growth, and loss, and we will press on.

True to form, my sermon title asks another impossible question for us to answer, but asking the question is valuable, even if we never discover the correct answer until we are face to face with Jesus! "Why Did Jesus Ascend," anyway? Wouldn't it have been more wonderful to

have him stick around on earth to continue working miracles, healing the sick, and teaching his disciples? Next Sunday is both Memorial Sunday and Pentecost, so although it may feel like an end to our season after Easter, it is really a beginning for the disciples and for us. As we complete our journey through Lent, Easter, and Eastertide, Jesus has been with us physically and in spirit in several appearances. But last Thursday, according to the church calendar, he ascended to be with his Father in Heaven; that is why we celebrate Ascension today. And next Sunday we will celebrate Pentecost and prepare to receive the power and direction of the Holy Spirit! Next Sunday you may wear red and families will prepare to receive a token of remembrance of our congregational loved ones who have passed away since last Memorial Sunday 2025.

Let us remind ourselves what the Ascension is and means. Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:1-11 are the typical Bible passages documenting what happened forty (40) days after Easter, when Jesus physically departed from the earth. Both the Luke and Acts passages chronicle the conclusion of Christ's earthly mission as a separate event in time and place, describing the Ascension (i.e., where Christ ascends or "is lifted up" to the Father). The other gospels, Matthew, Mark and John, describe the gist of what happened, but summarize it for another purpose, whereas Luke documents the Resurrection and five appearances of Jesus following it. He saw the appearances, including the Ascension, as proof and evidence of Jesus' resurrection. This year, I chose other passages because we do not need that "proof" today despite my question in the sermon title; rather, we need to carry on last week's conversation by figuring out how

to apply this Ascension to our lives on a daily basis to cope with the world in which we live. We seek “application” of the Scriptures!

We sometimes get discouraged by the world in which we live: violence, politics, death, war, and natural disasters. Like the tree in our story last week, we are planted, nourished, tossed by winds and weather, experience the seasons of uncertainty, are sometimes scarred by others, grow, and die. I believe the disciples must have felt the same way in their own time: betrayed by a friend, witnessed the crucifixion, feared their own persecution, experienced deep loss, and were likely overwhelmed by their new responsibilities. Like our tree, the disciples were not left alone. Jesus didn't ascend to leave his Church behind, but to lead and guide it! If the resurrection didn't seem enough to convince his disciples of his divine status, surely the ascension must! In his *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas says that Jesus' ascension prepares the way for our own entry into heaven, since Jesus will appear first on our behalf. Just as the high priest under the Old Testament entered the holy of holies to stand for the people before God, so also Christ entered heaven “to make intercession for us,” as is written in Hebrews 7:25.

That intercession is, in my humble opinion, the “why” of our story. As flawed human beings, like our tree from last week, despite our foundational roots of faith, we will face difficult life circumstances or choices. We need God's help overcoming them. Psalm 47 and the 1 Peter passages address ways we can live into Jesus' Ascension and intercession for us. First, we must praise God for his blessings and availability to our struggles. Many think that this psalm was written for transporting the ark of the covenant up to Mount Zion:

⁴ He chose our inheritance for us,
 the pride of Jacob (*which is the land of Israel & the city of Jerusalem*), whom he loved.

⁵ God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
 the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.

However, this psalm also looks forward to the ascension of Christ into the heavenly Zion, after he had finished his earthly mission, and to the setting up of his kingdom in the world. In reading this psalm we give honor to the exalted Redeemer, rejoicing in his home-going to celebrate with praises to the glory of God the Father. He and the Father are One and now are together again on the throne.

That sentence alone gives me great comfort, knowing that God's power, not human's, is still in control. Remember the apostle Peter is writing to Christ followers exiled in foreign lands who are struggling to survive and sustain their faith in hostile environments; they desire to follow Jesus' teachings in a society that is heathen, conflicted, and not welcoming. Sound familiar? I brought these passages together to give us some perspective on God's power, his glory, Jesus' sacrificial death, resurrection, ascension, and the apostolic instruction Peter gives his readers and us to resist the devil's evil ways, staying the course to strengthen our faith and to receive his grace.

Warnings are not fun to receive; Peter is simply telling the truth that suffering will be part of a Christ follower's path. We never want to hear that, and I am sure that his readers did not wish to believe it. But Peter's role in the new church was respected; he was an eyewitness and apostle chosen by Jesus, yes, a simple fisherman, but a man who gave up everything to follow, learn from, and to be with Jesus. He had

experienced fiery trials already and knew that there were more to come. So, our second passage is both a warning and instruction to support one another, bearing each other's burdens; to practice love, kindness, and charity toward fellow believers to help sustain their faith; to resist evil by following Christ's teachings. Serve others; love others; be resolute and vigilant. Aren't those good reminders for us today? Remember, none of those actions are ours alone to accomplish. We are resilient because of Jesus' Ascension and power to overcome death through eternal life with God, the Father. Amen? Amen! ||

Please pray with me: Omnipotent God, we thank you. We thank you for the gifts of life, strength, and resilience; we thank you even for the suffering that makes us stronger or shares a testimony of your power in our lives. Help us to glorify you in all we do, think, or say. Deepen our faith so that we can resist evil in the flesh or spirit. Strengthen our resolve to follow your teachings, living lives acceptable to you and modeling Christian values for others. You are the deep roots of our faith and church. We ask for wisdom to tolerate the suffering when it occurs. We ask for courage to seek help when we need it. We ask for boldness to proclaim God's goodness and grace. May we faithfully share Christ's salvation with others. We pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.