

## “Ascension: The Day Jesus Began Working From Home”

A Sermon by Rev. Ruth Ragovin  
First Christian Church, Murray, KY  
Sunday, March 24, 2020



Woodcut of the Ascension of Jesus Christ surrounded by Disciples. In Martin Luther’s *Eyn Sermon ann vnsers Herren Hymelfarts Tag. Marci am. 16 : Von der Summa des Euanglij, das ist, der Glawb. / Martinus Luther. Wittemberg.*

Luke 24:44-53 ~ <sup>44</sup> Then he 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 of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup> and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup> And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” <sup>50</sup> Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. <sup>52</sup> And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; <sup>53</sup> and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

I've long been interested in a spiritual practice known as walking the "Stations of the Cross," which allows us to deepen into a greater awareness of what it means to follow Jesus. Since the early Middle Ages, in the language of the Church, stations were a succession of pilgrim stops, which often are represented by statues or pictures on the walls of churches (such is the case here at St. Leo's) or sometimes outdoors, which depict the final hours of Jesus' life beginning with his trial before Pontius Pilate and ending with his crucifixion and burial. Walking the stations can be a powerful experience. I remember once when walking the stations with an ecumenical group comprised of Catholics, Orthodox, and numerous Protestant denominations during Holy Week in La Mesa, CA, as we carried a cross and stopped, reflected, and prayed at each of the 14 stations, I almost felt as though I had been transported back to travel with the crowds who accompanied Jesus as he carried the cross.

Having already experienced walking these the Stations of the Cross on multiple occasions, my soul's pump was already primed when I discovered that at the historic Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, home of a famous labyrinth, there was to be an opportunity to participate in the "Stations of the Cosmic Christ," that would go beyond just the final 20 hours in Jesus life with a sole emphasis upon the cross, to covering the major moments and archetypal events in Jesus' entire life with the goal of awakening the Christ consciousness within us. Since I could not travel to San Francisco, I was delighted to learn that Matthew Fox and Bishop Marc Andrus, along with the artists M. C. Richards and Ulrrich Javier Lemus, had created a book called *Stations of the Cosmic Christ* (Unity Books, 2016) containing 16 walking stations with artwork and writings for personal reflection.

I eagerly purchased it and it became the basis for a spring spiritual retreat I facilitated on the Cosmic Christ at our denominational West Area Camp KBY a few years ago.

These stations, or pilgrim stopping points of the Cosmic Christ, include significant moments in the life of Jesus as well as the most important “I am” statements from John’s Gospel and the teaching of Matthew 25 “Do it to the least and you do it to me,” which is an archetypal declaration of the meaning of compassion. As I list the 16 Stations of the Cosmic Christ, I want you to ask yourself the extent to which you are familiar with these and whether they have deep meaning for you as a Christian:

Station One: Creation (Genesis 1:1; John 1:1)

Station Two: “I am the Light of the World” (John 14:4-14; Genesis 1:3-4)

Station Three: The Nativity (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 2:1-20)

Station Four: The Baptism (Mark 1:9-13; Matthew 3:13-17)

Station Five: “I am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35)

Station Six: The Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-9; Luke 9:28-36; 2 Peter 1:16-1)

Station Seven: “I am the Vine” (John 15:1-17)

Station Eight: “Do it to the least and you do it to me.” (Matthew 25:31-46)

Station Nine: “I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:1-18)

Station Ten: “I am the Gate” (John 10:7-10)

Station Eleven: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:5-21)

Station Twelve: The Crucifixion (Mark 15:33-39; Matthew 27:45-54; Luke 23:44-48)

Station Thirteen: The Resurrection (Matt 28:1-20; Mk 16:1-20; Lk 24:1-49; Jn 2:1-18)

Station Fourteen: “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:1-44)

Station Fifteen: Ascension (Luke 24:50-53; Mark 16:19-20; Acts 1:2-14; Eph 4:3-16)

[Station Sixteen: Pentecost (Acts 2:1-47; John 20:19-20)]

Ascension! Whoa! What is that all about? Wasn't it that day that Jesus was lifted up into the heavens like a hot air balloon rising? That's the event described in today's lectionary scripture, which is the final passage in Luke: *<sup>50</sup> Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.* (Lk 24:50-51)

Today I'd like us to stop at this station to ask ourselves why the Ascension should be considered to be one of the primary sixteen stopping points on the Christian journey. Now even though I have quite an extensive theological education behind me, I admit to being somewhat baffled by it. Yes, I vaguely remember that the Ascension comes 40 days following the Resurrection during which Jesus appeared to his disciples and continued teaching them and 10 days before the bestowal of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (which, btw, is the final 16<sup>th</sup> Station of the Cosmic Christ), which we will celebrate next Sunday.

Truth be told, the Ascension is just not something we have celebrated in our branch of Protestantism. I'm kind of like the Presbyterian minister Rev. Dr. Catherine Taylor, who said:

“When the Sunday closest to Ascension Day rolls around, it always poses a dilemma: [read from the Old Testament, or a Psalm, or epistle] or read the story of Jesus rising into heaven? Last year in my congregation, [she said] Jesus didn’t ascend into heaven, probably because I liked the lessons for the Seventh Sunday of Easter better, and because, well, the Ascension is tricky.” (Rev. Dr. Catherine Taylor, Ascension of the Lord,” [http://day1.org/513-power\\_source](http://day1.org/513-power_source)). Yes, I agree with her that it is tricky! But I want Jesus to rise into heaven in our congregation today, even while meeting virtually. I want us to spend some time in the Station of the Ascension, even if it is difficult to wrap our heads around. And, hey, what better thing to do in the midst of a Pandemic, especially if we have run out of puzzles to do and are tired of bingeing on Netflix!

Now there definitely are some strange and unsettling images around the ascension. Jesus suddenly saying something like “Beam me up Scotty!” Jesus rocketing upward into outer space. The disciples looking up into the sky and only seeing Jesus’ feet dangling there. It may be because these images are just so plain weird with all its bizarre supernatural elements that we don’t want to stop at this station but rather just walk quickly by it, almost like the Priest and the Levite on the road to Samaria who don’t tend to the man who was robbed. They don’t stop, walk quickly by, and just look the other way. I get it! We are so much more comfortable focusing on the teachings of the tamer historical Jesus than we are with the Cosmic Christ ascending into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father.

But let's ponder why the Ascension was included as one of sixteen stations of the Cosmic Christ. Even more to the point, why was the ascension of Jesus so important to our Christian ancestors that they included it in an early Christian creed? You know, that part of the Apostles' Creed that says, **“On the third day he arose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”** Well, actually, you might not, because we members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are notably and perhaps stubbornly non-creedal. But many Christians recite this every week!

Yet, in our defense, we are more grounded in the liturgical year than some Baptists, who don't even celebrate Lent. After all, we do celebrate Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, Palm Sunday, Easter (of course!), and next week we will celebrate the Day of Pentecost. We even make some mention of the Transfiguration. But the Ascension? I remember first learning that there was something called the Ascension when, as a middle schooler living in Germany, I saw paintings and woodcuts of Jesus where one only saw the bottom of his bare feet as he was swept into the clouds with his footprints left behind on the rock he had been standing on and the faces of his followers looking upward with puzzled expressions on their faces (see page one). That strange image has always stayed with me.

Now another reason we ignore the Ascension may derive from the fact that, while the author of the Book of Acts says that Jesus, after his resurrection, hung out with his Disciples for 40 days before ascending into the clouds, the timeline suggested in Luke's Gospel is different (even though, go figure, both were written by the same person!).

In Luke, Jesus is crucified on Friday. Then on Sunday, the same day that Jesus tomb' is found to be empty, Jesus appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, who then run excitedly back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples that Jesus is risen. While they still are talking about this, Jesus then appears to this group of followers, extends his peace, shows them his hands and feet, and while they were filled with joy at seeing him asks them for something to eat. They give him a piece of broiled fish, which he eats in their presence. When he was done eating, the scriptures continue in what is our lectionary passage about the Ascension for today:

**Luke 24:44-53** ~ <sup>44</sup> *Then he 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 of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”* <sup>45</sup> *Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,* <sup>46</sup> *and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,* <sup>47</sup> *and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.* <sup>48</sup> *You are witnesses of these things.* <sup>49</sup> *And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”* <sup>50</sup> *Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.* <sup>51</sup> *While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.* <sup>52</sup> *And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;* <sup>53</sup> *and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*

And it is with this that the Gospel of Luke ends, with Jesus being teleported back up into heaven in an act we describe as the Ascension. While in the Book of Acts, Jesus does all of this appearing and teaching and eating in the space of forty days after the Resurrection before being whisked up into the air like a helicopter taking off, in Luke's Gospel the Ascension, or Jesus being carried in bodily form up into the heavens, all seems to take place on the same day. The Resurrection and the Ascension get conflated into one event somewhere between verses 49 and 50 in chapter 24 of Luke's Gospel. And that's one reason why I think that within many branches of Protestantism we kind of gloss over the Ascension. Because it seems to be a mere footnote to the Resurrection, we don't stop long enough to see whether it might hold important spiritual teachings in and of itself.

But we should focus on it! For not only is the Ascension mentioned in the Apostles' Creed but Augustine, one of the great church fathers, considered it to be the crown of all Christian Festivals? More so than the Incarnation! More so than Easter! More so than Pentecost! The shining Crown! Today, as we linger at the station of the Ascension, I wonder whether those disciples who observed their beloved Jesus being whooshed back into heaven ever could have imagined that this event they witnessed would go on to be memorialized through one the earliest festival days within Christianity, even going back to the Apostles. Known as the "The Feast of the Ascension," it was celebrated on the 39<sup>th</sup> day after Easter, which means that it always falls on a Thursday. It would go on to be a day marked by special liturgies recalling Jesus' entry into heaven, with our human nature being glorified in the process.

Could the disciples ever have imagined that on “The Feast of the Ascension” some countries in Europe actually would declare a national holiday, closing government offices, banks, and post offices. Would they find it remarkable that in Portugal Christians would create special Ascension wreaths to hang on their doors that would include wheat (representing a bountiful harvest), olive branches (representing peace), and daisies (representing prosperity)? Would they find it strange that in parts of England it would be believed that any eggs laid on the day of the Ascension would never rot? Or that people in Sweden would get up at 4 AM to wait for sunrise to come to hear the birds sing? Or that there would be processions with torches and banners to commemorate the entry of Christ into heaven, with the wearing of special mitres by deacons, and the elevation of the figure of Christ above the altar through an opening in the roof of the church? Would they want to join with a procession in England where a banner is held up with a lion at the top and a dragon at the bottom representing the triumph of Christ over the evil one in his Ascension? Actually, I’d like to see that!

Of course, we will never know what these disciples might have imagined would come of what they witnessed. But there are some things we can learn about that day from scripture as we stand with them at the station of the Ascension. First, we know that the Ascension occurred in or around **Bethany**. Why Bethany? We know that people often want to spend their final hours with their loved ones at home, or in a familiar place. And even though we talk about Jesus of Nazareth, we know that Jesus no longer felt that was his home. He had been driven out, even by his own family, who thought he was crazy.

Bethany had become a place of refreshment for Jesus during those final years where he encountered gracious hospitality and welcome. He frequently spent time in the home of Mary (who some think was Mary Magdalene), Martha, and Lazarus to the extent that it became a kind of home away from home where he went to retreat. Matthew records that after Jesus drove the money changers out of the Temple he went to Bethany and spent the night there. It was in Bethany that Jesus raised his beloved friend Lazarus from the dead. Six days before the Passover Jesus traveled to Bethany to spend the evening at the home of Simon the Leper. There Mary anointed Jesus' feet with perfume and dried his feet with her hair. It was from there that Jesus, strengthened by his friends for the difficult journey before him, returned to Jerusalem on that day we remember as Palm Sunday.

Yes, it feels so good and comforting and right to spend this moment with Jesus in Bethany, that place in the world where he felt most comfortable, welcomed, and loved. He wanted to say his final good-bye to his disciples from that personal sacred geographical space. And what does the Gospel of Luke record as Jesus' final act? While the shorter ending of Mark breaks off with the disciples fleeing in fear, and Matthew records Jesus' final act as giving his disciples specific instructions about next steps, and John's Gospel ends with Peter's confusion, Luke's Gospel leaves us the following picture about Jesus final act on earth: <sup>50</sup> ***Then he led them out as far as Bethany and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.***

What a beautiful final act! First lifting up his hands like their ancestor Moses of old and then blessing them.

**Blessing** is perhaps the most precious spiritual act there is. It is the most important gift we can offer another as we choose to see them as God sees them, as divine, as worthy, as important, as special, as irreplaceable. When we bless others, we seek with words to strengthen and call forth that divine goodness that lies at the heart of every person. Encountering them as God's beloved children, we empower and encourage them to offer their uniqueness as something of value to the world and others around them. Jesus, that day, looked into the eyes and the very heart of each of his disciples who had traveled with him, raised his arms, and blessed them.

Roger A. Paynter tells us that: "In 1979, during an archaeological excavation in Jerusalem, two small silver amulets were found in a burial cave. These were small objects upon which Hebrew scripture was inscribed, to be worn on the body. These two amulets were dated to the sixth century BCE. Although they were almost worn smooth, Hebrew scholars were able to decipher the words; *'The Lord bless and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace'*. These words were probably written on amulets before they were even written in Hebrew Scripture (Num 6:24-26), which should remind 'us' of the long-standing role the power of blessing has played in our Jewish-Christian heritage." (Roger A. Paynter, Luke, Volume 2, *Feasting on the Gospels*, p. 361).

Jesus takes his leave of his disciples by performing this deeply spiritual Jewish act of offering a blessing, something so valuable they would place it in their hearts as the most valuable gift they ever had received.

One wonders what words Jesus used as he blessed his beloved Mary Magdalene, Peter, James, John, Thomas, Philip, Cleopas, Joanna, Joseph, Andrew, Bartholomew, Thaddaeus, Simon, and his closest friends who stood with him during his final moments on earth in the village of Bethany where he had such sweet memories of being supported by his friends? This, too, we can only guess, but what we do know is that whatever he said empowered them and filled their hearts with tremendous joy, for the last words in Luke's Gospel state that they "***returned to Jerusalem with great joy;*** <sup>53</sup> ***and they were continually in the temple blessing God.***" Not just a little happiness but GREAT JOY is what his blessing brought them.

And while he was blessing them the scriptures say: "***he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.***" The book of Acts fleshes this out a little by providing the detail that: "***as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight***" (Lk 1:9). The mention of clouds in scripture signify encounters with the divine. The very human Jesus, perhaps with that broiled fish still being digested in his stomach, and all of humanity being lifted with him into the divine, points to the divinization of all creation! With the Ascension Jesus becomes the universal Cosmic Christ, the life-force pulsing through everything that is. This explains why, during the Festival of the Ascension, we celebrate not only the glorification of Jesus the Christ with his entry into heaven but also our human nature being glorified in the process. While the Incarnation represents the divine becoming human, the Ascension symbolizes the human and all of the universe becoming divine.

As the disciples stood there and witnessed Jesus being lifted up into the heavens while blessing them, no doubt this group of followers, who had been nurtured within the Jewish faith, were immediately reminded of something similar that had happened to an ancestor of theirs. Do you remember what happened to **Elijah**, they may have asked each other? Was our Jesus not just carried off into heaven like Elijah was? Do you remember the story? The prophet Elijah (as told in 2 Kings 2) knew his end was near and, as he and his protégé Elisha were walking along, Elijah said that he would grant Elisha a wish before he departed the earth. Elisha said: ***“Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit”*** (2 Kings 2:9). Elijah responded: ***“You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.”*** (2 Kings 2:10). In other words, Elisha needed to be a witness to Elijah’s ascension into heaven to be able to receive a double portion of his power. And Elisha did witness, see with his own eyes, Elijah’s ascension and because of that he was granted a double portion of Elijah’s prophetic powers.

Before going to Bethany Jesus, like Elijah, had spoken to his disciples about their being witnesses to him and receiving power from him. Jesus said to them: ***48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.*** In Bethany they were indeed witnesses to Jesus’ ascension and, filled with joy, they returned to Jerusalem to wait, wondering if they too, like Elisha, would be filled with a double portion of power from on high.

For just as Elijah had passed on the baton to Elisha for him to carry on his work on earth, Jesus, through his ascension, handed the baton to his disciples and to all of us to carry out his work in the world without his physical presence. But to do this we need to be clothed with power from on high. Will they and will we receive it?

And now, as we leave Station Fifteen on our pilgrim journey and carry the baton Jesus gave us before he ascended into heaven, let us continue on toward Station Sixteen representing Pentecost, encouraged and strengthened by both the promise of power from on high and the hope given to us in that most ancient of Jewish blessings that goes:

***‘The Lord bless and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace’. Amen.***