

Kuhn Memorial Presbyterian Church
Barboursville, West Virginia
May 21, 2023
Ascension of the Lord

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude

*Call to Worship Revelation 5:13

Then I heard every creature in heaven
and on the earth and under the earth
and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

**To the one seated on the throne
and to the Lamb,
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever!**

*Prayer of the Day

**God of heaven and earth,
we rejoice today before the throne of Christ's power and peace,
for he has put down tyrannies that would destroy us,
and unmasked idols claiming our allegiance.
We thank you that he alone is Lord of our lives.
by your Spirit,
give us freedom to love with his love,
and to embrace the world with his compassion.
Accept the offering of our lives,
that we may obey your commands to witness and serve.
In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

*Hymn 826 Lift High the Cross, verses 1 and 2

Prayer of Confession

Lord Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and ascended for us, we have not loved you as our Redeemer, or obeyed you as our Lord, we have not brought our prayers to you, or heeded your tears shed over the world you created. Forgive us, breathe into us a new spirit of compassionate service, and make us joyfully adherent to your will and way. Amen.

Hymn Take, O Take Me As I Am
Assurance of Forgiveness

The mercies of the Lord are from everlasting to everlasting. They are new every morning and sure as the sunrise. Know you are forgiven and be at peace.

Scripture Reading Luke 24:44-53

Time With Our Young Disciples

Scripture Reading

Morning Message

Does the name Peggy Whitson mean anything to you?

Ms. Whitson, age 63, became the oldest woman in space when she when she rocketed off the planet on Thursday. She headed for the international space station, where she will celebrate her next birthday.

Peggy's first mission was in 2002, which was an extended stay aboard the international space station. She became the first woman to command the ISS, the first woman to become NASA's Chief Astronaut, the most senior position in the NASA Astronaut Corps.

She holds the records for the oldest female spacewalker and the most spacewalks by a woman. She retired in 2018, but, returned to the field as Axiom's commander of Axiom Mission 2.

Whitson was chosen years ago as Christa McAuliff's back-up teacher in space, which she finally accomplished in 2007. Her academic background is rich. She received degrees from Iowa Wesleyan and Rice Universities in biochemistry. She also studied overseas in preparation for her career.

I know there are outstanding male astronauts in our country's history, but Peggy Whitson was the astronaut whose contributions were on the news this week.

Have you ever wondered what it feels like to be launched into space? According to one astronaut, the main engines ignite at six seconds before liftoff, the entire orbiter rattling and shuddering like a skyscraper in an earthquake. A deep rumble shakes the cabin as the main engines came up to thrust. At T-minus zero, the solid rocket boosters ignite, giving the astronauts a massive kick in the back as the ship blasts off the pad, accelerating at 2.5 Gs, ripping through the atmosphere, eventually reaching 3 Gs for a final minute to reach orbit. They say it feels like two of your friends are standing on your chest until the main engine drops to zero. Then the pressure on your body vanishes, and you are afloat under their straps, in free fall at last. You

lived to make it through orbit with an exhilarating sense of physical and mental relief to pass through the risky phases of lift-off and ascent into orbit.

There are only a few select individuals who know what it means and how it feels to slip earth's bounds and ascend to heavenly heights.

I do not know if these are people of faith, but, it seems if there were ever an occasion to seek God's presence and protection, streaking through the earth's atmosphere at unimaginable speed, leaving kith and kin behind, this would be it.

Such other-worldly things could not have been achieved in Jesus' day. We do know people of Jesus' day thought about heaven and located it high above us in a place called heaven, or paradise. They must have wondered how to reach it. And, according to witnesses, this is the way Jesus slipped earth's bounds and ascended to heaven.

But, what about those he left behind? They must have been equally awed and grief-stricken. They would not see their friend again in this life.

Jesus is fully aware of the impact of his leaving- first at his death and then again at his ascension. And so he turns to prayer.

The exquisite passage in John's gospel has been affectionately called "the other Lord's Prayer." Sometimes it is called "Jesus' high priestly prayer." Words describing it fail us.

The setting is the upper room, where so much has happened that very night...a Passover meal, the institution of the Lord's Supper, the washing of feet, a betrayal.

Still in Jesus' presence, the disciples remain attentive to his words. But now, the words are not directed *to* them. Here, Jesus is praying *for* them. Jesus is praying for that time when they would carry on his ministry, but without his earthly company.

Commentators say this is the most detailed prayer of Jesus in all the gospels. In the fifth century, CE, the Bishop of Alexandria, whose name was Clement, said that in this prayer Jesus was fulfilling his role as a high priest for his people. This is the origin of the term, "high priestly prayer."

In the Old Testament, there were three holy offices: Prophet, Priest, and King. No one assumed these offices on their own. Only those called by God and anointed by the Holy Spirit entered into these offices.

As we look back over the entirety of Jesus' life, we can see how he came to fulfill these holy orders. At his birth, Jesus is referred to as the infant king. You recall that Herod decreed that all baby boys two years of age and younger were to be put to death because Jesus' birth was interpreted as a threat to Herod's rule and reign. Throughout his ministry, from the time he read scripture in the Temple, to his trek down to the seashore, in visiting the crowded cities, and dining at the homes of his friends, Jesus was prophet. Remember, when we come across the term "prophet" in scripture, we may substitute the word "preacher." Jesus preached, or prophesied, wherever he went.

But, here, in these last few moments with his disciples, in the upper room, their gathering place, it is Jesus, the High Priest, speaking. The work of the priest was to mediate between human beings and God. People would bring their sacrifices to the temple and the priest would present them to God. There were thank offerings that were burned. There were memorial offerings that were waved.

And then, there were the sin offerings that were sacrificed. As the people brought their offerings forward, the priest would take the animal, present it to the Lord, sacrifice it, throw some of the blood on the curtain in front of the Holy of Holies, and then throw some of the blood on the sinner. As he performed this rite, the priest would say, "The Lord has forgiven you all your sins."

The High Priest did not mediate for a specific man, woman, or family. The High Priest mediated for the whole nation of Israel collectively. The High Priest carried out one special offering to the Lord. Every year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter alone into the Temple. No one else was permitted to enter. He would take one animal, a lamb, into the temple, on behalf of the whole nation, and sacrifice it at the altar. He would then take the blood of that one lamb behind the curtain, into the Holy of Holies, and pour it out onto the Ark of the Covenant, where God himself was believed to dwell. The High Priest would atone for the sins of the whole nation by one sacrifice, "once for all."

We can see how Jesus is, for us, the Great High Priest. He mediates between us and God. He offers himself, the Lamb of God, to take away the sins of the world, to take away our sins.

In this prayer, Jesus gives us a glimpse into the warmth and depth of the relationship between himself and God. He prays for his friends. He prays for us in our generation. This passage is exclusively prayer. There are no instructions, no charges, no challenges. Jesus is asking God to bless his friends with the kind of relationship he has with God, whom he calls Father. He asks that God bring his friends together as one, as he and God, Father and Son, are one. He pleads for unity among them. He expresses his deep desire that they love one another as he has loved them.

How very important these things will be to the fledgling church. To be united in purpose and love would strengthen and empower the believers in the strife-filled years to come. The love of Christ will compel his followers to mighty heroic acts, breaking the chains of oppression and bringing relief to those who suffer. They would advance the kingdom, in size and in spirit, and bear it to generations yet unborn.

This idea about unity is important. Jesus asks God to bring his followers together like he and God were united. You know, we may claim to be united, but, it is a hard-to-achieve state.

Yesterday the Presbytery of West Virginia examined a young woman for ordination. She will be serving the largest of our churches, First Presbyterian in Charleston. The candidate is presented with a series of questions about Bible and Theology, Polity, Worship and Sacraments, and Christian faith. Then any presbyter in attendance may ask the candidate a question.

This candidate was asked how she would pastor opposing factions in a church. It almost took my breath away, for I am aware of the challenges such a high-profile church in the state capital face. The red and the blue can clash, and do. How does a pastor respond? How can a pastor lead opposing groups of Christian people to set aside their tightly-held issues in order to serve Christ and his Church?

She answered simply that a starting point would be to identify those things they hold in common, which she hoped would inspire them to realize they had more hopes, dreams, and desires in common than ideologies that divided them. May it be so. Especially during the legislative session.

Where have we witnessed some significant demonstrations of unity? I recall that about two years ago, a crack was discovered in the Hernando de Soto Bridge that spans the Mississippi River between Arkansas and Tennessee. The discovery called for an immediate closing of the bridge. An inspector actually called 9-1-1 to report the emergency and seek help stopping traffic. But that wasn't the only concern. The traffic passing under the bridge, the boats and barges, would have to be re-directed, too. Think about that a moment. Picture yourself trying to cross that bridge. Maybe its rush hour and you are anxious to get home, pick up your kids, let the dog out. And you are not alone. Hundreds of others have urgent reason to get to the other side. Those on the river have products to move, deadlines to meet. We can almost feel the adrenalin pumping.

With a single goal, a unified purpose, that community prevented a tragedy. The repairs would take awhile and inconvenience everyone. But on the other side of this crisis is a great unified celebration, with the governors of both states in attendance, and high school bands marching from one side of the bridge to the other on the day it re-opens to traffic.

Sadly, we can point to incidents when the power of unity is mis-used. People can be compelled to unite around destructive ideas. They can be emboldened to perform heinous acts that seem to be increasing in frequency and degrees of destruction. Jesus recognizes the presence and power of evil and asks God to protect his friends from the evil one.

We don't talk much about Covid these days, though it is still a threat to our health. Health professionals taught us that the antidote to Covid is a vaccine. Being vaccinated is a process. I've been through it and survived. In the beginning you had to qualify by age or condition or occupation. Get your name on a list. Show up when its your turn. Roll up your sleeve. Feel a tiny pinch. Wait fifteen minutes, then off you go. Hopefully, you will not suffer side effects.

The antidote to evil is *love*. No qualifying, no waiting, no pain, no side-effects.

For God is love. And, as you've heard before, those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. In heaven and on earth.

I'm not a very quantitative person, but I think it's safe to estimate that approximately none of us has witnessed a person being taking up from earth into the clouds and vanishing from sight to be transported to the right hand of God.

Which presented me with a problem this week as I considered the message I would share with you. I stumbled around my theological attic a bit until I learned that an extended family member had just that day been delivered to the entrance of a local hospital by family members, to have joint replacement surgery. No one was permitted to accompany him. I wondered how that felt on both sides of that event. What does it feel like to be a patient, or to face surgery alone, and what does it feel like to drop off a loved one and see the doors close behind him, shutting them out. When would they see each other again? Would they see each other again? I know many of you have experienced this same thing recently.

And then I remembered how this scripture text connects to our life and faith.

Since Advent and Christmas, I have been thinking a lot about the nature of Jesus, fully God and fully human. We celebrate his humble birth at Christmas. This is Emmanuel, God with us, a baby like we once were, who would grow and learn and experience the full range of human life. We call that "low Christology."

Here, in his ascension, we witness his divinity. Though he was born like us, he ascends to heaven, unlike us. This is high Christology. In my preparation, I was getting stuck in how we

could relate to the divinity of Jesus, when all around me, and indeed, around all of us, are testimonies of his humanity, his presence with us in this time that has brought separation, mortal threat, fear, and a real “cloud of unknowing.”

This is a very disquieting and discomfoting time. We may not want to acknowledge it. We were raised on rugged individualism here in the mountain state. We’re strong and sturdy and nothing can shake us or shake our faith.

So, dear friends, why did we strip bare the grocery shelves and fight over toilet paper? Oh, we can justify it. We needed to be prepared. I said that, too. Why? Because we had been plunged into a disaster we hadn’t anticipated. We were not in control. So, we took control in whatever way we could. This is human nature.

Several weeks later, we are in a different place. We are making plans to return to church and other gatherings. We are thinking about going out to lunch or shopping at the mall for the first time in months. Maybe we will even dare to make vacation plans. I can hear the beach calling my name.

But, in our efforts to get back to life as we knew it, let’s think of how we have been changed...for the better.

I think one of the most important lessons we will have learned as we emerge from this Covid 19 era, is that the last time we kissed a loved one good-bye, hung up the phone, turned in an assignment, borrowed sugar from our neighbor...may well be the last time we see that person for awhile. And, those precious moments, that we probably took for granted because we couldn’t anticipate how the pandemic would interrupt life, may have been the last time we will be with that person this side of heaven.

And that is sobering.

The story of Jesus’ ascension is repeated in the book of Acts, which is also attributed to the writer of Luke’s gospel. In the Acts account, as Jesus disappears, a couple of angels appear to the disciples. Now, usually when angels show up in scripture, they say, “Fear not!” That’s the first message.

Not here. In this text, the angels ask the disciples why they were standing still, staring at the sky. And in the Luke text, Jesus gives them their job description: repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in Jesus’ name to all the world, beginning at home right there in Jerusalem.

If we take these two accounts together, we might interpret the message to be:

“Shake a leg, people! There’s work to do. You will miss Jesus. You will grieve his loss. Do something with what Jesus taught you. Love people. Forgive offenses. Show people the abundant life that results from turning away from sin and turning toward God.

And, that’s what I would offer to all of you who have seen a teacher for the last time, or a classmate, or a neighbor, or a loved one. Do something with what he or she taught you. It will be a tribute to their life and give purpose to yours.

*Hymn 826 Lift High the Cross, verses 3 and 4

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles’ Creed p. 35

*Hymn Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer Including the Lord’s Prayer

God of Goodness, grace, and love,

like the Apostles, we stand looking toward the sky,

not fully understanding all that this day means.

We fail to grasp the wonder of your ascension.

Forgive the smallness of our vision,

the narrowness of our outlook,

the weakness of our love,

the nervousness of our witness,

our repeated failure to recognize

the fullness of your revelation in Christ.

Give us a deeper sense of wonder,

a stronger faith,

and a greater understanding of all you have done for us.

We have many concerns on our hearts today and we lift now the names of those in need...

...the sick, those in the midst of treatment, the recovering, their families and caregivers;

the lost, the lonely, the confused, and the forgotten;

those in the halls of government, boards of educations, and all public servants;

for those who are returning to work and those who must now search for it;

for all those who are given charge of family and loved ones;

give us your strength, wisdom, and love that we may care for them as you have cared for us.

We pray in the way Jesus taught us saying, **Our Father...Amen.**

*Hymn 839 Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine

*Blessing

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ,

the King of glory,
give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation
that makes God known to you.
May the eyes of your heart have enough light to see
what is the hope of God's call,
what is the richness of God's glorious inheritance among believers,
and what is the overwhelming greatness of God's power
that is at work among us. Amen.

Postlude: