

“Open the Eyes of My Heart”

May 24, 2020

Heart of the Matter series – 7th Sunday of Easter – Livestream
Ascension Sunday/Aldersgate Sunday/Memorial Day weekend

The church has gotten a lot of press this week. So much said and lots of opinions about opening church buildings and how to proceed in this time that we’ve never been through before. What’s the safest, best way? How do we love one another well as we really miss being together?

I can tell you honestly that it’s good to be back in our sanctuary. It’s easier to have a bigger, yet still small, crew making worship happen, but it’s not the same. And it may never look and feel quite the same as before – at least not for a while.

It’s been a challenging and transformative time for all of us. Maybe you, like me, have had a few “come to Jesus” meetings with yourself as we’ve chartered new territory with both frustration and courage.

Perhaps we’ve felt like this cartoon: **SHOW SLIDE** - *It seems like God is too far away from me. I can’t see anything. God is too far away. We’ve had moments when God’s presence has been elusive, and when we needed new perspective to remember the promises of God. We’ve all been challenged to see the world differently in this time of a virus that has affected the whole world – with many dead and many recovered – and all of us changed.*

And the church looks different, too. To quickly change our way of worship to be present online, meeting together, studying and learning together, making decisions together, learning to work a new program so we can join in, and maybe even giving in a new way - all a challenge. And I want to say how grateful I am to you for doing what you have done to keep on living the faith we claim and being the church – the Body of Christ.

Looking at Scripture is even a new experience now. To recognize and re-engage with Scripture that I’ve read many times before, but the lens is different – at least for now. Everything sounds different to my ear as we’re navigating this new time of physical distancing together.

And today is a convergence of a lot of times to remember. Memorial Day as we remember those who have died while serving in the military. For our Methodist family, May 24 is a special day when John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, had one of those “spiritual highs” at a place on Aldersgate Street that made it in his personal journal. It was a time of renewed faith for Wesley, and we mark it because

God's grace continues to transform our lives – to call us to deeper faith and trust in Christ.

It's also Ascension Sunday – when we remember that Jesus ascended to heaven 40 days after his resurrection. And if you like church humor, here's a good one that was passed around this week among pastors.

SHOW SLIDE: Ascension – the day Jesus goes to work from home

This account in Scripture is mysterious and dramatic and amazing. Marva Dawn writes, "Ascension Day is the perfect church holiday because the world can't steal it. The culture around us has quite ruined Christmas and Easter...the world has now stolen [Christmas] for its consumeristic purposes and has seized Easter for the same idolatry. In my teen years I played clarinet in the high school band for the town Christmas parade at which Santa Claus was flown in by helicopter. Later, I heard, they flew the bunny in for Easter. But the world hasn't got the foggiest notion what to do with someone flying out."

We don't know what to do with someone flying out! The closest image for me is a memory from my childhood. Hot air balloon enthusiasts took advantage of good weather in the summer, and we'd frequently see balloons in the sky nearby. My parents' home includes a lot of acreage, and on a few occasions, a balloon would descend into the back pasture and stay there for a bit until they were ready to take off again. There was one time when I got invited into the basket and went up just a little ways – still tethered to the ground. But the image of the balloon rising up and floating away at the end of the visit is a beautiful one.

We've gone back and forth in this season of Easter – reading from Acts 2 passage about life in the early church probably located in homes and small groups. We've coupled that with the call from letters written to early Christian communities – reminders of the power of resurrection and new life even as they made their way in a tenuous time and kept the faith.

Today we go back to this pivotal moment between Jesus' resurrection and Pentecost – Jesus' ascension into heaven. We don't spend a lot of time on it usually. We say it when we recite the Apostles' Creed, but it usually comes and goes without much notice.

Jesus ascended into heaven and sits at God's right hand. It's foundational to our faith because we believe that Jesus is exalted in heaven, and so we worship and serve him as Lord of our lives. We affirm that Jesus is still alive and still offers us the Holy Spirit's power to minister in his name and for his sake.

But in this moment, as we're worshiping from home, as we're wondering what's next, as we wait to gather together in person, the Ascension story hit me hard. I'll admit

that. The disciples are together with Jesus, and after he ascends into heaven, they worship him together, go back to Jerusalem together to wait for the power he promised, and they praise God together in the temple. They are together in the same physical place.

And we're not. And yes, this is hard. From my perspective of a pastor, it's been the wildest time in almost 20 years of ministry. And I'm not alone. Every pastor you know is feeling that. Apart from the technical changes, it's made me face something that's always been true – except I sometimes don't remember that I need to believe it and embrace it. It's what Jesus says just before he ascends and offers a blessing.

And it's this: We are witnesses to the work of Jesus – his life, death, and resurrection. We can try to remove ourselves from that call – to shirk that responsibility – but Jesus is clear. Especially now, witness isn't just about our personal, face-to-face contact with others, but it's also about how we interact on video calls and use social media. It's about how we act in a grocery store or any place where we might have to wait. What does your Facebook profile tell others about our faith? How do the pictures we post show what we believe in? How does our presence online show our witness to God and God's place in our lives? How does our demeanor show our relationship with Jesus – our Risen Savior and Lord?

Paul writes to the people in Ephesus about the faith he sees in them. He thanks God for them – I thank God for you - and for the ways that we see God's glory lifted up by one another. I thank God for the ways you witness to me. Paul prays for the spirit of wisdom and revelation “so that you may know God better.” That's really the goal that all of us have - to know God better. And it's the call we have as witnesses – to make God better known.

Our focus is still on our hearts – the heart as the center of our thought, will, imagination, loyalty, faith, and faithfulness. And Paul prays the words of the song we sang – that the eyes of your heart will have enough light...to see the blessings of God clearly. And that includes that call to be witnesses.

We pray that the eyes of our hearts would be opened to God's presence and power. We are not a social club. We are not a local hangout. We are the church - the Body of Christ. And the church is never closed. The Body of Christ never shelters in place, but is always at work, moving, praying, witnessing, and loving in the name of Jesus – who is over it all.

To be the Body of Christ is to see the world through the eyes of Jesus - to see through the eyes of love, to see through a lens of love before anything else. As Christ's body here on earth, we live in his love and we live out his love faithfully.

But before we get too caught up in the call and lament because it's hard, we also claim our full humanity. We're not perfect. We're always working on it, always seeking to see more clearly with loving eyes and a loving heart. N.T. Wright says, "To embrace the ascension is to heave a sigh of relief, to give up the struggle to be God (and with it the inevitable despair at our constant failure), and to enjoy our status as creatures: image-bearing creatures, but creatures nonetheless." We're called to gratitude for God's blessings. We're called to do good in the world.

How will we witness for good? What does it matter that we love and serve God who is as close to us as our very breath? Why does it matter that even in the midst of all that's happening, we rest on a firm foundation? Who cares that the witness of Scripture and our witness are as needed right now as they ever have been? What will be do as witnesses who can testify to the love and grace of God who saves, helps, restores, comforts, and even sits with us as we grieve losses? How are we seeing differently – in a new way – from a heartfelt place of appreciation and gratitude? How are we acting differently because God has a hold of our hearts – even when we struggle?

Someone has said, "At the ascension, Jesus took all of human life, which he cared for so deeply, and brought it "into the heavenly places," into the very heart of God." May the eyes of our hearts be open to see God's glory, to look through a lens of God's love, and to serve in every way we can.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE & the LORD'S PRAYER