



ST ANDREWS UNITING CHURCH GLENBROOK

EASTER 7 - ASCENSION SUNDAY

PREPARING FOR WORSHIP

(You might like to have ready a cross if you have one, a candle and a bible)

We will look in every place
for the journeying of God
for in this way
of the cross
here is the wisdom of God

*(place a cross on your table or make the sign of the
cross on your forehead)*

We will look in every place
for the shadows of God
for in those dark places
bringing light
here is the wisdom of God

(light a candle)

We will look in every place
for the whisper of God
for in every word
breaking silence
here is the wisdom of God

(open a bible)

WE SING: 'You Are The Light of the World' by Cathy Pino

You are the light of the world.

You are the light of the world,

*so shine, shine, shine where
you are. You are the light of the world.*

You are a city on a hill...

You are a candle in the dark...

You are a star in the night...

You are the light of the world...

WE PRAY

God,

help us to pray

not just with words but with our lives.

Help us to understand,

not just to hear or to perceive,

but to understand within our hearts

what is the depth of your love,

the grace of your Son,

the call of our lives

and the assurance of your goodness.

Amen.

WE GROW FAITH TOGETHER

- Can you think of a time when you had to say goodbye to someone?

This is a story about Helen who went to a school just like yours. She had two really good friends, Jake and Shona. Some other people in Helen's class used to boast that they had lots of friends, but Helen did not worry about it because she treasured her two best friends.

Helen also went to a gymnastics club and she played the violin in the school strings group. Helen also went with her family to church on as many Sundays as they could manage. And on Monday nights she went to Cubs.

Then one day her parents sat her down with some news.

They were excited, but also nervous. They told her that they had both got new jobs in a town more than a hundred kilometres away. It would mean Helen would have to leave her school, leave her gymnastics and Cubs, leave her string group, and, worst of all, say goodbye to Jake and Shona. She got no sleep all night as she thought about how much she would miss them, and how sad she would be to leave them. A few tears came to her eyes as she lay in bed.

But as the dawn came and she could hear the birds outside starting to sing, Helen had a different thought: *I've been thinking about myself all night and how sad I will be to leave my friends, but they are going to be sad too.*

Jake and Shona will miss me just as much. My gymnastics squad will miss me, my string group will miss me, my Cubs group will miss me. There are more people here who will miss me than I thought about before...

Helen got out of bed and pulled out her craft box. She started making cards for everyone, decorating them on the

outside with pictures that related to how she knew each person and inside she wrote a message saying what that person meant to her and why they were special to her. When she finished she was still sad and very tired, but also really excited to be able to share how she felt about the people who were closest to her. It made saying goodbye a little bit easier.

In our Bible readings today, we hear about how Jesus had to say goodbye to his disciples after the resurrection. I imagine that Jesus also felt sad saying goodbye, so Jesus left them with a blessing and a promise that the Holy Spirit would be with them always.

Imagine you had to say good bye to someone you loved. What might you say to them? What words might make saying goodbye a little easier?

Maybe you'd like to make or write a card to someone - even if they aren't going away - or to someone you miss because you haven't seen them in a long time. Find your own words or drawings to show them how you feel about them. This will be a blessing to them and also to you.

WE PRAY

We look to the heavens
longing to know
the full seasons of your kingdom.

We look to the heavens
longing to know
the heights and depths
of your steadfast loving-kindness.

We look to the heavens
longing to know that you are God
and that we are yours
and that in the end,
all shall be well.

Yet you hold the fullness of the seasons,
for you are the true depths of love
and only in you shall all finally be well.

Turn our heads
from too much star-gazing
and turn our hearts
from too much navel-gazing
that we might be present
to resurrection life right before us.

Remind us that any love of infinite power
will never overcome the power of infinite love.

Fill us with such resurrection power that in our love
and even in our doubt we might give witness
to the mystery of your kingdom
and the healing of your love. Amen.

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORD

These are holy words—words that reveal God's love,
words that inspire our hope,
and words that bring us joy.

Listen for signs of love, hope, and joy in the reading of God's holy word.

WE LISTEN TO THE WORD

Luke 24: 44-53

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Acts 1: 1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many

convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

SERMON: "Rising above it all" by Peter Berry

Today's scripture readings can be seen to bring us to the end of the Easter journey we have all been on these past weeks. The paradox is that while, in one way it is the end of the story, in another very real way it is just the beginning. Jesus has departed but the ongoing work of Jesus is about to commence. The passages from Luke and Acts

cover many different angles and there are a number of thought lines we could pursue but for today it is the ascension of Jesus narrative that we will reflect upon.

The scriptural account of the ascension of Jesus is not something that the Protestant church generally focuses too heavily upon nowadays. We tend to skirt around it a bit in our Uniting Church worship practices. While some of our Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox and no doubt Pentecostal brethren and sisterhood still place some emphasis on the ascension depiction, we tend to leave it somewhat undisturbed. There is probably good reason for this as it is not an easy story to come to comfortable grips with. It might validly be said that it raises as many questions as it gives answers!

Ascension Day fell last Thursday. It always falls on a Thursday as it is marked on the 40th day from Easter Sunday, the day of the resurrection of Jesus. That significant number 40 again! From the 4th century onwards, the ascension of Jesus to heaven has been celebrated 40 days from whenever Easter day falls within the western and Orthodox calendars. There are still many countries where Ascension Day is a public holiday just like Good Friday and Christmas Day here. Nations such as Austria, Germany, Norway, The Netherlands, France, Vanuatu and Indonesia to name just a few. Indonesia a Muslim country with a Christian holiday for ascension! How about that when we don't even mark the day ourselves?

In our society and culture the marked day slips past with hardly a murmur and that's understandable as the ascension concept is perhaps a mysterious and puzzling account of the final moments of the physical life of Jesus in our world. Sometimes it is easier to leave things alone rather than try to analyse them!

The Romans were pretty good at selling to their people the story of deceased emperors like Romulus and Augustus ascending to the heavens above as a sign of their divine approval. It was all baloney of course but the significance of the scriptural account of Jesus genuinely ascending to the infinite above world as a mark of God's approval cannot be overlooked. The Roman ascensions were shams, the one involving Jesus going skywards within a cloud was written up as being fair dinkum! Fact become a replacement for fiction.

I am sure that many of us have Sunday School memories of pictures we were shown of Jesus sitting on a fluffy white cloud with a group of children with their feet dangling over the side. It's very evocative stuff! Simplistic but impressionable on childish minds! I would imagine that most of us wouldn't see things that way anymore and would want to seek a deeper understanding of the intentions of the scripture writers. But there is no doubt that the Biblical depiction of heaven being somewhere up in the sky has permeated through society in general and is ingrained within the thinking of so many people today even those with no declared religious affiliation. How often

have you heard people bereaved through the loss of someone dear to them saying things like "I know they are up there looking down on me"?

We have to remember of course that these ancient writings about heaven came long before there was the breadth of understanding about the galaxies and planetary systems that we are part of. Heaven and God's dwelling place were just seen to be places above and beyond us. Another dimension. Somewhere out of reach.

The ascension story somewhat fits in with the other mysterious parts of the life of Jesus. How his birth came to be, how he talked with long dead figures of the past in the clouds on a mountain top, the way he disappeared from his burial tomb, the act of walking in and out of a closed room after his resurrection without any doors being opened and how he hiked along a road with some of his followers after his death without them recognising him. We understand the truth of the stories without ever understanding the practicalities of them!

So what is there for us today in these scriptural accounts of the ascension of Jesus? What relevance does it have for us in our spiritual journeys?

The ascension story is a bit of a paradox when you think about it. Why do we talk about Jesus leaving the world at all because we want to believe that he has never really left! We see the tenderness of a nurse leaning over the bed of

an aged person in their final days, we see the homeless man in the park sharing a smoke with his equally homeless companion and we see a little girl in a front yard help lift a toddler sibling who has fallen and skinned their knees on the driveway and somehow we see a continuing Jesus in our world. We see the presence of Jesus in the eyes and arms of others.

Whatever the case, what can we draw from the scriptures for today. What insights or angles might it possibly be opening up to us?

Are we being encouraged to rise above the inanities and irrelevancies that so often encroach into our lives? Are we being challenged to move beyond the distractions of the news waves - the rises and falls of the Sydney property market when some huddle in office doorways because they have nowhere to live at all. The latest gossip about celebrities and their antics while an old man with no identity at all shuffles along the footpath with no love, no purpose and no hope. Are we being nudged to stop listening to the loud know-it-all voices of some of the arms of the media and to instead heed to the quiet and reasoned voices of the experts?

Jesus was part of the world in his time here yet at the same time above it's worst habits. Are we being asked to do the same?

Can we see in the ascension story a default line to mark the end of the ministry of Jesus but the taking up of the cause by his believers?

Is there some symbolisation in the ascension to prove once and for all that no matter what the world threw at Jesus during his lifetime he was able overcome it all and rise above it in the end?

Is there a call to us as a church today to move beyond our past limitations and to move in directions that once might have seemed further even than our dreams would have taken us? Maybe it's all of these things but most likely much much more!

I read an article recently by a cynical journalist who confidently predicted the imminent death of the church during these pandemic times as people would no longer be able to congregate on Sundays in their places of worship. Like many prophets of doom over the centuries he failed to understand that the church is more than a building, more than a body of people hemmed in by walls and more than ceremonial proceedings at a fixed hour each week. How wrong he is. The Jesus movement could not be killed off when the numbers were down to 11 men and a few loyal women in the days following his crucifixion. To suggest it will happen now is a brave but vastly misguided prognosis.

Yes some small church buildings may never reopen again as places of worship after this crisis is over but the Jesus people will live on.

All over the country the church is finding new ways each day of reaching its people and those who aren't its people in a manner it once could not have envisaged. Our live streaming and zooming and face booking and other IT mechanisms have opened up new horizons, new possibilities, new witnessing and new opportunities. We are rising above the challenges of the times. Despite the awfulness of unemployment and financial loss, the stress of health and domestic challenges and the fear of what is yet to come somehow we are finding a way to keep going as a church in our struggle to keep the light of Jesus aflame in a darkening world.

This pandemic has changed us. We have been forced to assess what is really important in life and our relationship with others. We have been made to think about what we can live without.

Some years ago, an elderly lady within this congregation, frustrated at the time with the way the world was going, astonished me with her forthright statement "What we need is another World War!" I was a bit taken aback with such a thought - the awful suffering, the loss of life, the destroyed cities, the food shortages and the mass dislocation of communities. How could you wish that upon us I thought at the time? But I think after all these years I

am beginning to understand what she was really wanting to say within that rather shocking pronouncement. For I think that war has come and we are in its midst and it has changed everything. It has forced us to adjust in ways we could not have once contemplated, to re order our priorities and to sift out what is superfluous and tackle what is essential. We have needed to reconnect with those we once might have neglected and to strive for the common good rather than what is in it for us. We have been made to realise that party politics and ideology has no place in a time like this.

We have learnt a new respect for health and aged care workers and teachers and truckies getting food and supplies to isolated communities and those checking on the frail and disabled and parents trying to home school. We have been forced to look at what is really important in life and what is it about human existence that really matters. We have seen that we can work together in a common aim. We have seen that we can learn more respect for each other. We can see that care and compassion and decency and humility - the very things that Jesus spent his life talking about, needs to form the very fabric of our society to make it a better one.

I think after all these years I have an inkling on what that dear old lady was saying. She didn't want a war with with pain and grief and misery. She just wanted a new direction. A sweeping away of the mindset of the past. A new dawn for a new age.

Yes, after all these years, Nola Pollard I think I know what you meant!

My final words are from the 1500's. They were spoken by Teresa of Avila. She said

"Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on Earth than yours. Yours are the hands with which he blesses the Earth. Yours are the eyes. You are his body."

May the scriptures for today give us enlightenment as we reflect upon them and may we be glad in it!

WE SING: 'Christ Has No Body Now But Yours' by Porters Gate

Christ has no body now but yours

No hands, no feet on earth but yours

Yours are the eyes with which He sees

Yours are the feet with which He walks

Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world

Yours are the hands

WE PRAY FOR OTHERS AND OURSELVES

God of Christmas Calling,

Easter Joy

and Pentecost Fire,

our days are filled with strange actions,

our world is filled with hurt.

our too-quick breath is filled with anxiety.

We seek after solutions and solace that ease the pain,
but do not lighten the load.

Help us cast our cares upon your shoulders,
help us to rest our anxiety in your love.

Attune us to the needs of others
that we might be for them,
the comfort promised by you.

Help us to be present to our inward unrest
that we may show up for others
with gentle words
and quiet comfort

Be with those filled with angst and anger
that so often threatens to devour them.

Help us cast our cares upon you that we might know
and be lead to show
your deep care for us
and all of creation. Amen.

WE OFFER OUR GIFTS

With joy, we bring our gifts.

With joy, we offer our lives.

May the offering of our gifts and our very selves
bring joy throughout the world. Amen.

WE OFFER OUR PRAISE

Praise God from whom all blessings flow

Praise God all creature here below

Praise God above you heavenly host

Praise Father Son and Holy Ghost

Amen

INTRODUCTION TO PENTECOST SUNDAY 2020

Next Sunday is Pentecost Sunday, the day when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. Normally our church would be full of bright red colours and the sounds of celebration. This year, we are invited to embody the gift of the Spirit in the world, in our relationships in community, and in care for one another. Next Sunday we will have no online worship, for instead I want to send you out to practise the presences of the Spirit in your daily lives and in the life of the community we are called to serve and love in Christ's name. Consider for a moment where you feel that sense of the Holy Spirit with you.... For some it may be walking in the bush, walking the dog, working in the garden. It may be in times of intentional prayer, prayer that can also be painting, dancing, singing, writing, creating . For others it may be in the kitchen cooking or baking treats for others, or sharing a meal. It could be speaking with that special friend or mentor. It could be watching the world around you more carefully, noting the little things...*Where does the Spirit come alive in you?*

We may also receive the gifts of the Spirit...

Those unexpected gifts we receive from others, the kindness and compassion of a stranger, neighbour, friend,



the delightful awareness of just how precious a cuddle on the couch can really be.

So my sisters and brothers in Christ, we live in uncertain and fearful times, and the world needs us to practise our faith whole heartedly. This Pentecost let us share and bear witness to the movement of the Spirit in our lives, in the good times and in the hard times.

So I'm inviting you this week to share with me your 'Spirit Sightings', 'Spirit Sharings' and 'Spirit Stories'.

Be brave,

Be curious

Be open to the movement of the Spirit

And then share it with me in some way - a photo, a story, a record of yourselves doing something that is Spirit lead, a phone call to tell me about it...

What ever it is, if you would share your experience with me, I will then bring our communities embodied Pentecost experience together in some way, to share with one another and others in our online and at home worship service the 7th June.

May the Spirit lead you and surprise you in the coming days.

WE ARE SENT INTO THE WORLD

When the world shifts
and a new world is needed,
who shall go?

When nothing is familiar any longer
and our voice no longer recognised,
who shall speak out?

When the darkness comes
and a fresh flame needs to burn,
who shall light it?

When the old ways seem so fragile
and the new uncertain,
who shall lead the way?

When things change
and the ground shifts,
who shall seek a sure foundation?

When the saviour is gone
and the way unsure,
who shall step out?

God's latest saints.
God's chief sinners.
God's own people.
They shall step out
in the name of the one whose
presence
never leaves us
and has called *us*,
into the world.
AMEN.

