

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

June 2, 2019

Celebration of the Ascension

Acts 1:1-11

He's Gone! Now What?

When we think of the high holy days of the church year, what comes to mind? Christmas – Easter
And then after that we might add... some of the special days of Lent – Ash Wednesday, Maundy
Thursday/Good Friday, Palm Sunday, Pentecost – Holy Spirit Sunday.

I doubt many of us thought of today – Ascension. Ascension was actually last Thursday, and is always on
a Thursday. It comes 46 days after Easter, so it moves around like Easter does. And since we don't go to
church on Thursdays, we're getting Ascension today.

And Ascension is – very simply – the day when Jesus – the walking around on earth Jesus – leaves the
world for good. He's been resurrected and has been hanging around with the disciples for 40 days in his
resurrected body; but, as a friend of mine likes to say, he's got to get back to headquarters, and so is
dramatically taken up in a cloud to heaven, leaving the stunned disciples behind.

The bottom line – Jesus was gone. And I wonder... what was it like for them to go back to their friends to
tell them what had happened? Perhaps this news was as unbelievable as the news 46 days earlier that he
had come back from the dead. Now you see him, now you don't!

It seems to me that things are not much different for us 2,000 years later.

Where's Jesus? We wonder.

I mean, when we consider the world around us, he's not a very prominent figure. And there are plenty
who say, 'This is a world without God'. A world where, moment by moment, children are dying in poverty
of preventable diseases, where tyrants are planning to secure their power over suffering populations,
where men and women are struggling to put their lives back together in the wake of natural disasters,
and where people are dying in loneliness and living in anxiety all around us.

Where is Jesus, indeed!

As Christians though, who gather week after week, we might answer differently. Looking around this
room – we could say he's in the window up there, or the table up here, or in the hearts seated
throughout.... all true. But is that it? Because we know he's not walking around on earth anymore. The
answer to the question "Where's Jesus?" is... "He's gone!" Which leads us to another question - a
better question - "Now What?" And one of the places where we find the answer to THAT question is in art.

You see, when artists paint/draw the ascension of Jesus (both classical and contemporary) there is often
a similar feature: the disciples – those remaining on earth – are depicted as reaching up toward Jesus as
he is taken away. Sometimes his feet are shown dangling at the top of the frame, and always with the
nail holes in them. This image captures for me the answer to this: NOW WHAT? And the answer is that we
should reach for the feet of Jesus. Even as we are left, gazing up into heaven, scratching our heads,
looking around, wondering.

Reach for the feet of Jesus – the wounded feet of Jesus – to remember that his suffering and death were
for us.

Reach for the feet of Jesus – the resurrected feet of Jesus – in the sense that we want our Lord to be close to us in prayer, reading the Bible, faithful participation in his Body, the Church. Because there is always the danger of an “out of sight – out of mind” relationship with God.

Reach for the feet of Jesus in the same way Jesus reached for the feet of the twelve (even Judas!) on the night in which he was betrayed, when he demonstrated an undying love for all of them in the washing of their feet. We look for places we too can “love one another” even as he loved us, not allowing the “Judases” in our lives to escape our Christ-inspired love.

Can you imagine what your life would look like if you were constantly reaching for Jesus? How about our church? You know, there are so many things to reach for; many good in and of themselves – good grades, the next step in a career, a certain friendship, a comfortable home, financial stability, a healthy body – things that can serve us quite well. But Christians are not called to serve themselves, we are called to live beyond ourselves, for God and for others. And we do that by reaching for Jesus.

Years ago some friends of mine were moving their family of four from Maynard (where we live) to Lancaster, PA. And, not surprisingly, the money they got from the sale of their little house here could buy them a very big house there. And, for tax purposes, they needed to put all the money from the sale of their house into their next house. Well, they were really uncomfortable with the sizes of the houses they were looking at - they did not at all fit the lifestyle and spirit of their family. And so they realized that if they had to have a large house, they would commit to being a home of hospitality and consciously sharing Christ’s love with others in their home. It became the go-to home for their kids’ friends as they became teenagers, and they constantly welcomed people and groups to stay with them.

The story goes about the artist who painted a scene with a storm at sea. Black clouds filled the sky. Illuminated by a flash of lightning, a little boat could be seen disintegrating under the pounding of the ocean. People were struggling in the swirling waters, their anguished faces crying out for help. The only glimmer of hope appeared in the foreground of the painting, where a large rock protruded out of the water. There, clutching desperately with both hands, was one lone seaman.

It was a moving scene. Looking at the painting, one could see in the tempest a symbol of humankind’s hopeless condition – the only hope of salvation was the Rock of Ages, a shelter in the time of storm. But as the artist reflected upon his work, he realized that the painting did not accurately portray his subject. So he threw it out, and painted another. It was very similar to the first: the black clouds, the flashing lightning, the angry waters, the little boat crushed by the pounding waves, and the crew vainly struggling in the water. In the foreground the seaman was clutching the large rock for salvation. But the artist made one change. You see he was a Christian – and so in this version, the one survivor was holding on with only one hand, and with the other hand he was reaching down to pull up a drowning friend.

That’s a pretty good answer to the question, “He’s gone, now what?” That’s a pretty good example of reaching for the feet of Jesus. And you know, sitting here today, you don’t have to reach too far. In fact, the Deacons will bring him right to you in your seat. And, as we reach for him, so we will find ourselves lifted above and beyond, which will also give us a Godly perspective on our lives, keeping us on His path.

That Jesus returned to the heavenly realm gives us magnifying glass into God’s heart that nothing else can. And somehow, and I don’t know how, he gives us access, a connection to a life beyond our own even as we live it out here and now. That’s what our church’s purpose of Sharing Christ ~ Changing Lives is all about!

Where’s Jesus?

In this room – certainly.

In our hearts – I hope so.

Beyond these doors – yes.

And the farther we get from this table, the farther we may need to reach.

But remember, even though he may be out of sight, he’s not out of reach.

AMEN.