

“Earth Day Ascension”
Macalester Plymouth United Church
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Scripture Introduction

Two weeks ago on Easter, we marveled at the empty tomb with the disciples. Since then, in the story, the disciples have witnessed the risen Jesus a couple of times, depending upon which Gospel you read. The Gospel of Luke ends with Jesus appearing to the disciples and charging them to wait in Jerusalem until they are “clothed with power from on high.” Then Jesus mysteriously ascends into heaven.

The book of Acts, which was written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke, picks up there and gives us more of a description of the ascension of Jesus.

Acts 1:6-14

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that Abba God has set by God's own authority. 8 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." 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 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." 12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

May these words be to us our light and our life

Thanks be to God!

Today we join with the millions of people across the globe who, this week, marked the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. Like it was back on the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, Earth Day is a time for everyone to reflect on their relationship with the Earth and advocate for the immediate changes necessary to protect it. It isn't just a day to celebrate the beauty and diversity of the natural world, but another reminder of our responsibility to guard and protect its future. Even though the pandemic is consuming our global attention for the time being, we know it isn't the only global crisis we face.

My guess is that just about anyone who celebrated Earth Day this week would say that we are a long way from realizing the dreams that were birthed on the first Earth Day. In fact, we watch as decades of good work by the Environmental movement, which largely exists because of that first Earth Day, is ignored or rolled back. What can people of faith, people like us, do now?

You don't need faith to understand that our planet is in trouble and hear the call to action. Science tells the story just fine. You also don't need faith to imagine how things could be better: less pollution, more renewable energy, less deforestation, more conservation, less exploitation of the planet's natural resources, more reuse and upcycling of what we already have, less taking from the planet, more giving back to it. We know where we need to go, but getting there has proved harder than we thought. But, remembering the children's time on Easter, we know faith can help you do hard things. Faith is essential to get you through a crisis. Faith is essential if you want to stare down fear and uncertainty and keep your head up, take the next step, stay together, keep hope

alive, continue the struggle, and embrace new possibilities. Our faith, Christian faith, is custom made for times such as these, when crisis piles on top of crisis, when we know we are in the midst of larger changes, but the way ahead is uncertain.

My guess is, the story of Jesus' Ascension doesn't mean much to you. Even though it is a feast day in the Catholic Church, protestants don't pay much attention to it. Progressive Christians even less so. How could a scene where the resurrected Jesus floats up to heaven on a cloud speak to us now, at a time such as this? In fact, isn't it just this kind of split between heaven and earth—all things good, holy and pure are "up there" and all things sinful, vulgar, and dirty are "down here"—hasn't that worldview permitted and caused some to look away from the exploitation of the earth?

During the Bible study this past Wednesday, as we questioned this text, we discovered it had questions for us. We must enter the story to hear them.

The disciples gather with the risen Jesus. Now that they are past their initial shock after the resurrection, they figure this must be the time when Jesus was going to make everything right, when the Romans would be kicked out of Jerusalem, and this kingdom of heaven Jesus kept talking about would arise. And so, they earnestly say to him, "Lord, is THIS the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?" Now I hear their weariness—the desperation that comes from living through a time of exponential losses. When Jesus died, they were ready to give up. Perhaps their question is also our question now months into

this pandemic. Is THIS the time when we finally get ahead of this virus? Is NOW the time when we can return to church and to work? Haven't we endured enough?

Jesus replies to the disciples, "It is not for you to know God's timing. But you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit." This probably isn't the answer they wanted to hear. It isn't what we want to hear, those suffering this pandemic, or those who have worked tirelessly for 50 years against other global calamities like pollution, deforestation and climate change. Why not now? Hasn't the planet endured enough? One of the hardest things for human beings is to endure suffering and not know when it will end. But just because we don't know when things will change, doesn't mean change is not happening! While we and the disciples might wish for some grand demonstration of power to right all wrongs and heal the world, this story is about power that moves and builds through God's people. We want to know when, the day, the hour, the minute when all this suffering will be over. But Jesus is saying, faith isn't about predicting the future, it is about trusting God and receiving the power that is given to us to face the challenges of today with love.

This leads to the second challenge to us in this story. After their exchange, the disciples watch in awe as Jesus exits on a cloud. You can imagine the look on their faces as this scene unfolds. Long after Jesus vanishes, they are still looking up, wide-eyed and bewildered, no doubt with grief welling up. Once again they must face what life will be like without their beloved friend and teacher. They look up hoping for some answer to come back down. And just then, these messengers

appear and ask the disciples, “Men of Galilea, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” The question breaks their upward gaze and their heavenly hope and brings their attention back down to Earth. It is as if they are saying, “Stopping looking to heaven waiting for answers, your attention is needed here and now.” Jesus had already told them what they were supposed to do. He said that they would be given spiritual power, and were to use their power to bring his love and justice to the ends of the Earth. Faith doesn’t call our attention away from the earth, but empowers us to engage its suffering and bear witness to the unseen possibilities revealed by Jesus’ radical path of love and justice.

The Holy Spirit finally does come down and empowers the disciples on the day of Pentecost. We will get to that story in a few weeks. But the ascension of Jesus begins to shift the attention of the disciples away from grief and despair, and towards hope and action. Jesus goes “up” but the power of the Holy Spirit comes “down.” Empowered by the Spirit, the disciples move into the world together and their witness becomes the church.

What can people of faith in Jesus do for a suffering world? Be the church. Be the church means many things. The UCC put some words to what it means to be the church that you can see in the graphic at the top of your bulletin. Forgive often. Care for the poor. Share earthly and spiritual resources. Fight for the powerless. Embrace diversity. Love God. And, yes, protect the environment! Being the church means taking seriously our power in this world. Remember the Marianne Williamson quote. “Our biggest fear is not that we are powerless, but that we are powerful beyond measure.” The Holy Spirit gathers people of faith to

do bold things. We must not abdicate this power, giving it over to fear.

Encouraged by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can come together and get through a pandemic. Emboldened by the power of Holy Spirit, we can come together to address Climate Change. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can be the church that brings love and justice to a hurting world, to the ends of earth, to the earth itself, even now.

According to an article on [ClimateBrief.org](https://climatebrief.org), the global movement to encourage people to shelter in place will result in an estimated 5% drop in global oil demand and will result in the single greatest drop in annual CO2 emissions. However, to begin to reach the level of reductions necessary to alter global warming, we would need a 7% drop in global oil demand and continue that every year for the next decade.

What gives me hope is to see how quickly we have changed our behavior to protect one another's health. After this crisis, might we be more ready to take on other changes that will be necessary to protect the health of the environment? Will people continue to drive less, walk more, plant more gardens, support neighborhood business, and only buy necessities? We can't just go back to the way things were. The way things were weren't working for the planet and most people on it. With the Holy Spirit stirring in us, we are called to protect the environment.

This is not a time to give up, but a time to give in and be the church. Amen.