May 24, 2020 • The Ascension • Online Worship

“See What Love Can Do: Power From On High”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Psalm 47
Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.
For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.
He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet.
He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves. Selah
God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.
Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm.
God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne.
The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted.

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”
Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

On this last Sunday of the Easter season, with Christians all over the world we celebrate the Ascension, one of the earliest celebrations of the church since at least the fourth century. This is the celebration of the power and authority of the Risen Christ, his nearness to God, and the affirmation that in Christ, everything human is forever near to the heart of God.

This year, Ascension Sunday falls on Memorial Day weekend, this holiday of remembering. We pause to remember our veterans and express our gratitude for those who have given their lives in the service of our nation. We remember and we give thanks, for everything human is forever near to the heart of God.

In traditional church language, we say that Christ ascends to be seated at the right hand of God. His Ascension is really the completion of the incarnation, God coming to earth to take on human form in Jesus. With Christ’s ascent into heaven, the church proclaims that the circle is whole, that God in Christ is always close to us on earth and that we, through Christ, are always close to the heart of God and that heaven is as near as the heartbeat of God beating within.

Nevertheless, the language of ascent also reinforces the old notion that Jesus has “gone up” somewhere, and that’s how the Ascension is always depicted in art, with the disciples looking up into the sky as the Lord disappears from their sight. It gives ultimate meaning to the phrase ‘making it to the top’ because surely nothing is higher up than heaven itself.

I have a hunch for many of us our experiences in this pandemic have radically changed our notions of what ‘making it to the top’ is all about. Many of you have remarked that the experience of slowing down, of sheltering-in-love, has revealed just how insanely crazy your family schedules had become. Trying to pack more into 24 hours than was really healthy. Even my middle-school neighbor said that she kind of liked a weekend hanging out with her family in place of driving hours away for a non-stop soccer tournament.

I’m not trying to romanticize it—and I also know that this far into this, many of you are going a bit nuts with perhaps TOO much time on your hands. But maybe we’ve all learned, or come to see more clearly, what’s really important.

The virus has in some ways leveled our world. It is no respecter of status or rank. There are no high achievers or under-achievers in its path. As we shelter-in-love, we’ve learned again that the highest attributes and values are all about kindness to ourselves and our family members, concern for the well-being of our neighbors, and respect for all the service providers we can too easily take for granted.

Everything about Jesus’ life and ministry shows us that human life is far more important than getting to the top of anything. In fact, everything about him redefines for us what “top” means. For Jesus, being on the top often means stooping low, stepping aside. It means reaching out and drawing near. It means being willing to give oneself away for the well-being of the other. And I think this is precisely what Luke means when he tells that just before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his disciples to do just the opposite: “stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” Stay here.

Stay where you are. Stay, he says. Stay where you are. Be who you are. Be who I’ve shown you you can be. I’ve already put you at the top of your game, and your mission is to live it out.

Stay. Right here, in your life as you know it. It’s Jesus’ way of telling us that he’s already put us on top. Stay. Love. Serve one another. Aspire to be the best mother, father, daughter, son, lawyer, teacher, banker, singer, preacher, engineer, student, graphics designer, architect, friend, neighbor, grandparent, disciple….you can possibly be. And in all things, love me, Christ says. And love one another as I have loved you.
Use the gifts I’ve given you, he says. Claim your baptism. Preach the word I’ve shared with you. Teach the things I’ve shown to you. Claim the vision I’ve implanted in your heart. Change the world right where we already are, using the tools and gifts he’s already given us.

Jesus is giving us a vision of his kingdom, hasn’t he, a kingdom where heaven and earth are one, on earth as in heaven as he said? A kingdom of love and compassion. A kingdom of righteousness and peace. A kingdom where the last will be first and the first will be last. A kingdom where no one is excluded or unloved. A kingdom where no one is hungry or afraid. A kingdom where tears are wiped dry. A kingdom where laughter replaces grieving and the tomb is always empty. A kingdom where the powers of darkness hold no power. A kingdom where the poor hear Good news and the eyes of the blind are opened. A kingdom where swords are beat into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and where the night becomes as day.

Everything about Jesus’ life and ministry shows us that human life is far more important than getting to the top of anything. So take some time on this Memorial Day weekend to take stock of your life. Have you become so caught up in climbing that you’re not seeing what’s going on around you? Are you so consumed by running after something more, something else, something new and different, that you’re running right past the people that love and need you most? Are you imagining that life would be so much better if only….you were here or there or had this or that or could do this, that or the other thing? Are you so caught up with yourself that you haven’t noticed lately where Christ needs you to be at work in his world? Have you closed your heart to the cry of the needy? Have you forgotten the things that make for peace?

Stay where you are, he says, and live out my kingdom within yourself and among yourselves. And in this way, the world will see and believe. Because of you, how you live, the world will see hope, will see my plan for loving everyone, will see a compelling way of life. In you, the world will see my good, good news.

Christ is present here today to bless you and to commission you. Christ, who is eternally present with God, will send you power through the Holy Spirit, power to lift you up and set you down to live your life fully right where you are. Christ will give you power to stay put, to shelter-in-love, to witness to the kingdom, and to love very well.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN