

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 Luke 24:44-53

May 28, 2006
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44He 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."

45Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49I 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."

50When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. 51While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. 52Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

In light of all the excitement this week surrounding baseball and the successful opening of the Beach Bums' first season, it's appropriate that we have a triple-header this morning. It's Graduation Sunday, Memorial Day Sunday, and Ascension Day. You've all come here with expectations of what you're going to hear and experience. For those of you focusing on Graduation this weekend, you're expecting a hopeful word about the future. Maybe an inspiring story of someone working hard and achieving big dreams. Something about treasuring the past even as you prepare for the future. These are the themes of graduation—hope, opportunity, and affirmation. Naturally, you're expecting to hear something about these things this morning.

However, you may have come here this morning expecting to pay homage to those who have died defending our country and the freedom of those in other countries. On this Memorial Day weekend, your thoughts turn to loved ones who have gone before, comrades who died in battle, and those who are in harm's way even now as they serve in the military. You're seeking a word of comfort, a feeling of patriotism, and to express your pride in your country and fellow citizens. Naturally, you're expecting there to be some recognition of the holiday during our worship.

Or, maybe you're like me and you've come with your mind focused on the liturgical calendar and this Ascension Day celebration. I hazard to guess that there aren't really many of you who fall into that category as you're asking yourself "the what day celebration?" But that's okay, it's my job to keep track of these things and call them to your attention. This is the day—Ascension Day—forty days after Easter—that we remember and celebrate that the Risen Christ, after spending some time with his followers on Earth after the Resurrection, ascended into heaven to sit on the right hand of God where Christ lives and reigns even now. In the midst of our busy lives, with so many people, companies, and organizations competing for our attention, it can be easy to forget a Christian holiday that doesn't come along with commercial fanfare and cheesy gimmicks. After all, when was the last time any one sent you a Happy Ascension Day card or took you out to dinner to celebrate? It's a rather forgotten holiday but is worthy of remembering and celebrating. Obviously, if the church is to be the church, we must be about the work of preserving and promoting our sacred holidays and memories.

And so what are we to do? How do we celebrate three different special occasions within one worship service? How do we all leave here getting at least a little something of what we came looking for when we stepped through those doors?

I believe the answer involves us remembering why we come to church in the first place. This is not first and foremost an educational institution, a social club, a recital hall, or even a place to remember the dead. This is first and foremost the house of God—the place we come to worship God. And with that in mind, let us turn our attention to what it means to celebrate Ascension Day.

Centuries ago, the Festival of the Ascension ranked right up there with Christmas and Easter in terms of importance to the church and Christians. It was considered a legal holiday and families went to church and then spent the day celebrating—workshops, businesses, and farming operations closed for the day. Indeed, when I was visiting the Cathedral of Rhemes in France, the ancient artists and craftsman included a rendering of the occasion in a series of stone carvings that line the interior of the sanctuary. These sculptures form a kind of island in the middle of the lower altar area. At the time the cathedral was built, very few people were literate. Therefore, Biblical stories and principles were rendered through art—stained glass, sculpture, and carvings—so that common folks were reminded of the stories even though they couldn't read them. The particular set of carvings I'm referring to were a series of about 25 nooks—3 by 5 feet carved at eye level into an immense piece of stone. In each nook, surrounded on all sides by this ancient mass of stone, there was a carving representing a meaningful event in the life of Christ. As I moved along from carving to carving, I enjoyed the challenge of following the chronology of Jesus' life, figuring out which event was being depicted—Mary's visit from the angel Gabriel, Jesus preaching in the temple as a young child, the calling of the disciples, the walking on water, all of these had been beautifully and painstakingly carved in this massive piece of rock in the middle of the ancient church. When I got to the end of the nooks—past the praying in Gethsemane, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and even Jesus appearing to Thomas and the other disciples after the resurrection, I was confused. As far as I could tell, the only thing carved out in the last nook of rock was a gentle hill with a couple of trees. I couldn't figure out what the point of this particular carving was. I must have stood there for five minutes, pondering the meaning of this empty nook. When finally, I looked up, and there, at the very top of the carved out portion, seeming to hang out of the “ceiling of the nook”, there were hanging two stone feet and a couple inches of leg. It was the Ascension. An important event in the life of Christ, and an important event in the life of the early church. Because it was Christ's final act—his Grand Finale—if you will. Jesus ascending into heaven was proof positive to his disciples that he was the Child of God, the Messiah, the Lord and that he wasn't dead. But he was alive and now in heaven in a place where he can reign over all the earth.

And that's why Ascension Day was, and still is, so important. Without this holiday, the story of Jesus leaves us hanging. Yes, the pun is totally intended. Without this final ascension into heaven, Jesus would have just died—again. And there wouldn't have been anything divine or special about that. The resurrection at Easter would lose some of its shine because we'd all know he was just in for it again. The Ascension provides us with proof positive that Jesus' words are true. At every funeral I say—“Remember the words of Jesus in John's gospel. In God's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Jesus went ahead of us to heaven—he's telling us that he's made room for us there. I used to think that he was some kind of glorified hotel maid—making up the beds and folding

back our sheets. But Jesus made a place for us there by giving of his own life and spirit on earth so that when we die, that won't be the end of it. But that we too, though not in some spectacle on a hillside in Palestine, we too will ascend to heaven into God's eternal embrace. Ascension Day marks the end of what happened at Advent—God coming to be among us human types. It marks the end of Jesus' earthly ministry and the beginning of Christ's heavenly reign over all the earth.

And that's why Ascension Day is worthy of celebrating. It reminds us that we've got something to live for and something to look forward to. And when I consider it, I realize that a celebration of Ascension Day fits in quite nicely with Graduation Sunday and Memorial Day.

Graduates, Jesus tells us that he goes before us—not just to heaven, but to wherever it is we're called to go. And so the message this morning is, that as you transition into this new phase of your lives, you are not alone. As you struggle with work, and studies, and family, and social life—though you may feel lonely—the spirit of God is with you. You don't have to go it alone. And no matter how far you go—it is God's spirit that keeps you connected to this church family that loves you. Know that we will continue to hold you in our thoughts and prayers, remember that we love you, and most importantly, remember that God loves you too.

And for those of you who came looking for Memorial Day at this service, Jesus' Ascension into heaven is the best thing you could find. Though you seek out the flags next to the graves that indicate a fallen comrade. Though you squeeze into your old uniform to march in a parade and polish old medals, you can know that it doesn't all end here. They didn't die in vain—indeed none of us die in vain. Jesus did not live in vain and therefore we can all die with dignity and are all welcomed into God's merciful embrace where the divisions of nations and creeds dissolve into eternal unity and peace.

And for you Margaret Lott—and anyone else who finds themselves in shoes like yours. You with a child serving in Iraq even now—let this Memorial Day be an occasion on which you know your son is appreciated, he is loved, and though he is so far away, there is a power greater than cell phone connections or email messages that keeps him in touch with you. For even now he is enveloped in God's love, just as we all are.

Friends, this brings our Triple Header to an end. Graduates—congratulations. Veterans—thank you. Our great cloud of witnesses—we honor you. And God, father and mother of us all who sent Jesus to show us the way and save us—we worship you, we adore you, and we thank you for this and all Ascension Days that remind of whose we are, where we're going, and who shows us the way.