

**SERMON FOR SUNDAY, MAY 16, 2021**  
**First United Church, Waterloo**  
**The Rev. Rose Ann Vita**



**We Are Enlightened by Scripture and Sermon**

**SCRIPTURE: Acts 1:1-11 (The Inclusive Bible)**

In my earlier account, Theophilus, I dealt with everything that Jesus had done and taught, from the beginning until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After the Passion, Jesus appeared alive to the apostles—confirmed through many convincing proofs—over the course of forty days and spoke to them about the reign of God. On one occasion,

Jesus told them not to leave Jerusalem.

“Wait, rather, for what God has promised, of which you have heard me speak,” Jesus said. “John baptized with water, but within a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

While meeting together they asked, “Has the time come, Rabbi? Are you going to restore sovereignty to Israel?”

Jesus replied,

“It’s not for you to know times or dates that Abba God has decided. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; then you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.”

Having said this, Jesus was lifted up in a cloud before their eyes and taken from their sight. They were still gazing up into the heavens when two messengers dressed in white stood beside them.

“You Galileans—why are you standing here looking up at the skies?” they asked. “Jesus, who has been taken from you—this same Jesus will return, in the same way you watched him go into heaven.”

**SERMON**     *Why Are You Looking Up?* (Reflections on an Ascension Hymn)

Please Sing Along     (Words Text: Copyright © 2007 by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette.  
Tune from VU 421 - Lancashire)

♪ *O Christ, when you ascended, you took your rightful throne;  
Your time on earth had ended — yet we weren't left alone.  
You reign o'er earth and heaven; your Spirit guides our way.  
Your prayers uphold your people; you lead your church each day.*

The Acts of the Apostles, the second Gospel account attribute to the community of Luke begins this way,

*In my earlier account, Theophilus, I dealt with everything that Jesus had done and taught, from the beginning until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After the Passion, Jesus appeared alive to the apostles—confirmed through many convincing proofs—over the course of forty days and spoke to them about the reign of God.*

First, I want to highlight to whom this account has been written; it is addressed to **Theophilus**.

Theophilus is a Greek word, a name, meaning "Lover of God" . . . Theo = God, Philia/Philos = Love/Lover . . . I like to believe that this account has been written for us . . . for you and for me . . . for us "Lovers of God."

Second, I would like to ponder the meaning of "**40 days**" . . . the number 40 has been associated with a lifetime, a new mission, a new identity, a new generation . . .

- Jesus began his ministry by spending 40 days in the wilderness to discover his mission; he ended his mission by spending 40 days helping his followers discover their mission.
- The Hebrews wandered in the wilderness for 40 years after fleeing from under slavery in Egypt; they emerged as a new people in a new land with a new promise and identity, and most probably as a new generation (since people normally lived about 30 years) . . .

So, 40 signifies to the original hearers of this message, and hopefully to us, that a new identity and mission is being conveyed to the followers of Jesus . . .

I wonder what that new identity and mission might be.

♪ *We look at earthly rulers and see what they command:  
We note their years of power, the borders of their land.  
Yet, Lord, you are not bounded by things like time and space;  
Your reign is never-ending, you rule in every place.*

A distinction is being made here:

- The kingdom of the earthly rulers, their values, their power, the conquest of land and resources, the domination of people and false promises . . .
- And the kin-dom (as we like to call God's reign, one of kinship and relationship, not of a king's dominance over subject, but of a collaboration of Christlike servants . . . of kins). The kin-dom of God is not bound by time and space, the essence of this kin-dom is of another dimension, another realm . . .

I wonder what that dimension and realm of God's kin-dom might be for us today . . .

*♪ We're tempted. Lord, to leave you in stories nicely told;  
Sometimes we don't believe you and say your ways are old.  
Sometimes we feel so lonely and live in doubt and fear —  
But your ascension means, Lord, you're present with us here.*

Another distinction is being presented here about the Ascension:

The Ascension marks a transformative moment. The followers of Jesus of Nazareth, no longer experienced Jesus by recognizing him by his body . . . whether as the physical body of the man, Jesus from Nazareth before his crucifixion or the apparent body of the Risen Christ.

The Second Person of the Trinity (whom we identify as "the Son of God"), now has a new identity as the Risen Christ . . . and a new mission . . . After the ascension . . . as our Lord . . . our God is the "I am" . . . and is declared to be present with us . . . on earth . . . here and now.

I wonder how God is present with us today after the ascension . . .

*♪ It's often quite a challenge to follow in your Way;  
We're easily distracted! It's hard, Lord, to obey.  
Sometimes we give you Sundays — an hour, maybe two —  
But your ascension means, Lord, all life belongs to you.*

Today we shared the sad news that Michael Savage has died this past Friday. As I was told, he passed peacefully away.

In my recent conversations with Mike, (and we had many for Mike was actively involved in the 1000 Peace Crane Project . . . we were going to hang 1000 origami [Origami = The Art of Japanese Paper Folding] in the church next Sunday for Pentecost . . .

Mike would say to me, "I believe the kin-dom of God is now, that heaven is on earth."

In other words, Mike, like the messengers in today's scripture, was saying: **"Why are you looking up?"** The kin-dom of God is here and now and we have God's work to do.

Mike never used the words, "We are the Body the Christ," but I believe that was what he meant. The ascension has changed our identity and mission: *"Christ has no body now but ours. Here on this earth, ours is the work, to serve with the joy of compassion."*

Mike also said that he was bored at the Board meetings because all we did was talk and his faith was about living the Gospel message of service . . . I am sure that most of us have many wonderful stories of Michael's sayings . . . and that these stories would reflect his understanding that following in the Way of Jesus is more than just showing up for an hour or two on Sunday.

I wonder how the Ascension makes all of our living belong to God. . .

♪ *One day, O Lord, we'll know you, as we are fully known;  
One day this world of sinners will bow before your throne.  
One day, God's whole creation will sing and praise your name;  
On earth as now in heaven, we'll celebrate your reign.*

Well, here is our challenge, both individually and as a collective.

How do we know God?

And how are we fully known by God?

The clue might be in these words attributed to Jesus:

*"Wait, rather, for what God has promised, of which you have heard me speak,  
John baptized with water, but within a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

*" You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; then you will be my  
witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the  
earth."*

We might have heard of scary accounts of people who claim to be "Baptized in the Spirit" . . . scary because their behaviour seems erratic and cult-like.

I do not believe that is what Jesus meant by our being washed and covered and emersed in God's Holy Spirit. I believe that the Risen Christ continues to be present with, in, and through us by God's Spirit, and that we are transformed into the mystical Body of Christ by the grace-filled gift of God's Spirit gifted to us.

But this is another sermon series . . . one that will continue throughout the Pentecost season . . . and its meaning and inspiration will hopefully continue to transform us throughout our lives.

Yes, the Ascension is a moment that changes us --- the Theophiluses --- the God-Lovers and brings us into an era of delightful change into a new a lifetime, with a new mission, and a new identity as the Body of Christ, a living sign of God's presence with all of God's creation.

May it be so.

Today and always.

Amen