

## Pastor Liz Kuglin-Alyea's Sermon for May 17, 2026 "For the work of ministry"

The Ascension of Our Lord is one of the few festivals of the church that hasn't been touched by our secular society. Christmas and Easter are celebrated in a very big way with ever increasing secular ideas and traditions encroaching on them that have little to do with the real meaning of the festivals themselves. Ascension is different. I think I'm safe in saying that none of us sent or received any "Happy Ascension Day" cards or set out appropriate festive decorations or are putting on a big celebratory meal today for family and friends. I wonder if we even consider when Ascension Day falls each year. It was just this past Thursday, 40 days after Easter Sunday. However, there are not many special services to observe it.

And yet, it is a major event in the gospels and in the life of the church. Jesus has spent 40 days since his resurrection teaching his disciples. But the post-resurrection tone of his teaching has sounded different from what they have been used to hearing. The topic is the same: the Kingdom of God. The need for Jesus to interpret what he was saying to the disciples is the same. Yet this time, the purpose is different. Luke records Jesus saying, *"Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."* (Luke 24: 46-48)

This time, knowing that he will shortly ascend back to the Father and no longer be physically with his disciples, Jesus commissions his disciples to be witnesses of all that they have seen and heard, promising them help, and instructing them to stay in the city until they are clothed with power from on high—with the strength and energy necessary to equip them with spiritual gifts to serve others and fulfill God's purposes. The disciples are likely wondering what is going on. Why is Jesus telling them to stay in the city? Won't he be going with them? Why would he leave them now? These had to have been some of the thoughts of those disciples that day. Then they watch as Jesus ascends and is carried up into heaven. They see him no more. Further questions likely arise: Where did he go? Why did he leave? Why didn't he stay on earth? Are we left alone?

Paul helps us grasp the importance of Jesus' ascension in his letter to the early church in Ephesus. Paul's prayer is that God would give Jesus' followers the spirit of wisdom, that is, seeing life from God's perspective which leads to life aligned with God ways, and, the spirit of revelation, that is, spiritual insight into God's nature and the redemptive work of Jesus. He asks that Jesus' followers come to know *"what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power"* and how God has *"put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he*

*[God] has put all things under his [Christ's] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*" In short, Christ has authority and power forever. Eugene Peterson, in 'The Message' puts it this way: *"Christ is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the centre of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence."* (p.403)

Christ has authority to empower the church, his body, as witnesses of all they have seen and heard to the whole world through the promised Holy Spirit. The empowered church will undertake the mission Christ has given his disciples: to preach the good news of God's grace and love for all people and to forgive sins. All this with the knowledge that Christ is present in his body, the church, for all time. And while this power is not yet freely felt until the Day of Pentecost, the new age of the church has begun. Jesus' ascension is indeed a major event in the life of the church.

What does this mean for us now? It means that the power given is not only to those first disciples; it has been given to us to also preach and forgive sins throughout the whole world. Their commissioning is our commissioning – the commissioning of each one of us.

However, I wonder if we truly comprehend the power that we're given. It's so easy to ask God in prayer to take of everything as if on our behalf, relieving us of the mission we've been given. I've saved a piece by award-winning author, women's rights advocate, and social justice activist, L. R. Knost that was included a while back in the Beacon. It's posted on my fridge door and reads: *"Get up off of your knees. Come out of your church...God can hear your prayers for peace, justice, and hope in this broken world just fine when you're out creating peace, working for justice, and giving hope to this broken world. When are we finally going to realize that humanity - love, mercy, hope, kindness, compassion, generosity - is the solution to inhumanity? When will we finally understand that we are all drops of the same ocean, hurting together, healing together, hoping together? So don't just pray for hands to heal the hurting. Pray with hands that are healing the hurting. Don't just pray for arms to help the helpless. Don't just pray for feet to respond to need. Pray on feet with arms that are responding to need. Don't just pray for someone to do something. Be someone who does something. Don't just pray for answers. Be the answer."* And of course, all this is with the understanding that as Jesus' followers, the power comes not from us but from God.

When we gather as a congregation, our Lord Jesus Christ is present in our worship service, feeding us with his Word and in his sacrament of Holy Communion. While he's hidden, we know, just as those early disciples knew, that Jesus is present. We're here to prepare ourselves to be empowered witnesses. We have already received that empowerment in our baptism and will celebrate and rejoice in that empowerment next Sunday on Pentecost. In our gathering this morning, through hearing the Word, by receiving the Sacrament, we're being strengthened and equipped to go out into our daily lives and share the good news

with the world. Whether we realize it or not, all of us are witnesses of the same things the disciples were. We haven't seen them with our physical eyes. Yet with our spiritual eyes, the eyes of faith, our hearts and minds have been opened to who Jesus is, what he has done for and continues to do for us through the Holy Spirit, and what our calling entails. His commissioning then is the same as it is now, that *"repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."* For us, that work begins not in Jerusalem. It doesn't start somewhere else but right here, right now, in Duncan, in the Cowichan Valley. It happens in our conversations at the store, on main street, over coffee, with friends, in our everyday lives. We don't have to be a powerful speaker or feel a call to a specific ministry to be a powerful witness of the love of Christ. It's simply about carrying the good news of new and abundant life - the Gospel we hear in this place - to those with whom we come into contact.

A beautiful old story tells of how Jesus, after his Ascension into Heaven, was surrounded by the holy angels who began to enquire about his work on earth. Jesus told them about his birth, life, preaching, death and Resurrection, and how he had accomplished the salvation of the world. The angel Gabriel asked, "Well, now that you are back in Heaven, who will continue your work on earth?" Jesus said, "While I was on earth, I gathered a group of people around me who believed in me and loved me. They will continue to spread the Gospel and carry on the work of the Church." Gabriel was perplexed. "You mean Peter, who denied you three times and all the rest who ran away when you were crucified? You mean to tell us that you left them to carry on your work? And what will you do if this plan doesn't work?" Jesus said, "I have no other plan—it must work." Truly, Jesus has no other plan than to depend on the grace-assisted efforts of his followers!

And here is the great paradox of the Ascension: The Lord is taken from the disciples' sight, yet he is more present than ever before. He lives now in the witness of his people. He speaks in the voice of his church. He acts through the quiet courage of those who carry his name into the world. And he does not leave us alone. He is with us "always, until the end of the age." (Matthew 28: 20) The Ascension opens the way for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who will come at Pentecost - not to replace Christ, but to deepen his presence within us. Neither we, nor those early disciples, remain looking upward. Relying not on our own but on Christ's promise and power, we go. We tell what has been made known to us. We become what we proclaim. Christ ascends - and the Church becomes his visual presence in the world.

Amen. Let it be so with us today and always.