

## Sermon June 1, 2025

After 50 days of being reunited with their beloved Jesus... listening to his teachings and just enjoying his presence... today they face the loss all over again, as Jesus ascends to heaven.

### Luke 24:44-53

Then Jesus 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 worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

### Empty Skies

Take a moment picture of the disciples, standing together as their beloved teacher and friend ascends into the sky. They are left staring up at the empty skies that seemed to have swallowed up Jesus. He was gone and their hearts must have broken just a little bit as they realized that they must go on with their lives and their ministries... **alone.**

But this time they were better prepared. No denials or betrayals. No running away to a locked room. No fear. With Jesus' blessings ringing in their ears, they returned to Jerusalem to pray and to rejoice. Perhaps its because this time their minds were opened to understand scriptures. There is something liberating in this statement. Our minds must be open to understand, not closed. Open to new possibilities...new beginnings... new hope. Reading the Bible with open minds, open because Christ has done the opening, reveals something new each time we read a passage. Opening our minds, opens our

eyes to see the world from a new perspective. It opens up our hearts to abide in God's love

They are ready, willing and able.

Of course, they also had Jesus' assurance that he would come again. At first, they must have thought they needed to work quickly, trying to reach as many people as possible before Jesus returned.

I can picture them occasionally looking up to the empty skies, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus. But with only the clouds and sun shining in their eyes, they picked themselves up and continued to do God's work.

And we still wait, looking up into the empty skies.

But on this day, in this beautiful place, we know exactly what God calls us to do. We are not supposed to wait helplessly and look at emptiness. Blessed and loved, we are each sent out as modern day disciples... followers of Christ.

Our time here should not be focused on empty skies but on God's full world. Jesus may not walk arm and arm with us. We may not be able to touch his wounds or hear his voice, but he is with us none the less, and there is so much that Jesus still needs us to do.

Jesus is here, and we feel his presence whenever we care for our brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors. Jesus is with us when we lift up the downtrodden, love the unlovable, treat a stranger with kindness. As Jesus reminds us, whenever we care for the least of these, our brothers and sisters, we actually care for Jesus himself.

These are challenging times. It is easy to look around in dismay and wonder when we will learn a new and better way to live. It is easy to look up at those empty skies in despair and ask "When will you come and change things?"

And then we hear that still voice deep within: "I have already given you all you need. Go and change things for me."

When we care for each other, when we fulfill Jesus commandments to us to love our neighbor, all we can really do is respond in Joy, just like the disciples

did so many years ago. To let the despair and fear fall away and rejoice in God's love.

Paul understood that joy. Unlike the disciples, he didn't learn at Jesus' feet. In fact, he was a Pharisee who hoped to stop this small movement before it took hold. He persecuted Jesus' followers... he was there when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned... And yet, Paul never looked back in regret, never allowed himself to be paralyzed by his mistakes. Paul embraced the joy found in faith and spread the word to of God's Eternal Love to people all over the Roman Empire. "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints," he wrote to the Ephesian church, "and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers."

The Church of the Ascension is built on the Mt of Olives on the place where Jesus ascended to heaven all those years ago. There is a slab of stone called the Ascension Rock which is believed to be Jesus' footprint, etched in stone forever. That footprint is a reminder that we are always called to follow Jesus' footprints. Each step we take as modern day disciples create new prints to follow – our Gospel imprint for all to see.

The disciples followed the gospel imprint to Jerusalem and beyond... Paul followed the gospel imprint from Damascus to the whole known world. We follow the gospel imprint too... honoring the legacy of those who built our church and sends us out to love and serve our neighbors.

And so it goes throughout time. We are Christ's body here on earth, generation after generation -- melting and molding and creating new life in barren places. Leaving the imprint of Christ's imprint every step of the way. New communities formed, old communities strengthened by missions and compassionate love. Churches just like this one standing as a small beacon of light. It may not seem like much but when joined with so many other beacons all over the world, we discover that the once empty skies are now shine bright with hope and love.

Amen