

*"Never-ending Spirit of Wisdom"*  
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Eastertide, Ascension Sunday, May 13, 2018  
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Holy Scriptures: Luke 24: 44-53; Ephesians 1: 15-23

Luke 24: 44-53 (NRSV)

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.

Ephesians 1:15-23 (NRSV)

<sup>15</sup> I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason <sup>16</sup> I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. <sup>17</sup> I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, <sup>18</sup> so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, <sup>19</sup> and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

<sup>20</sup> God 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, <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, <sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

My Georgia preacher buddy Bob Browning now lives in Kentucky.  
He shared that a former high school classmate of his is now a grandmother.  
She posted a story on Face-Book about the day  
    she had her 4-year-old grandson with her  
        when she dropped by a local funeral home  
            for visitation with the deceased's family.

The little boy took in everything, from the flowers to the casket to the mourners.  
Afterward, as they walked outside, he looked up at his grandmother and asked,

*"Was that man dead?"*

*"Yes, he was."*

*"Did you tell the family you were sorry?"*

*"Yes, I did."*

*"Did you kill him?"*

Clearly, he assumed that saying you are sorry  
    is necessitated by having done something wrong,  
        especially something terribly, terribly wrong.

As we grow up, as we mature in age and experience,  
    we hopefully also mature in wisdom and spirit,  
        like this charming four-year-old will.

As we mature we evolve to have fuller, deeper understandings.  
As a society we like to celebrate passages from one stage to another.

For example, we have ceremonies and rites of passage that signal academic maturity.  
This is the season of graduations, commencements, and academic advancements;  
    this is the time of year we honor and congratulate those  
        who have learned much and passed with muster  
            their tests and classes and grades.

Families and friends pose for photos with happy and relieved graduates.

Tassels are taken off mortarboards to decorate rear-view mirrors.

Diplomas get framed and placed on walls of honor.

Aunts, uncles, and the nosy neighbor from across the street call out "What's next?"

Maybe we need some rites or rituals that point to the evolution of spiritual maturity.

It's one thing to fill our brains with facts and data, with trivia and information,  
    and then to be commended, applauded and rewarded  
        for successful absorption, assimilation, and regurgitation of the facts.

It's quite another thing to grow spiritually and devoutly

in wisdom and compassion, commitment and grace,  
and then to be asked to be humble, to be modest about it,  
meek and unassuming and self-effacing,  
to accept there are no ceremonies in packed auditoriums  
to applaud and proclaim that you have grown,  
grown in spirit and wisdom and  
understanding.

And yet, my friends,  
that is both the goal and the process, the recognition and renown.  
Our progression of spiritual maturity  
requires that we suspend our understanding of the truth  
so that we can see beyond what we did not see before.  
A deeper understanding of God will lead us straight to people,  
to welcome and sit with and see the Christ in one another,  
and that is where true hospitality is found.

Religion has gotten a bad rap for being so inhospitable,  
and too often deservedly so.  
Yet religion at its core should be the epitome of unbound hearts and homes.  
Religion is the search for truth and the God beyond our gods.  
Religion provides a liturgical and lyrical pathway for spiritual growth.  
Religion creates permission-giving communities of faith  
that empower us to serve together, united in Christ.  
Religion, while saying yes to love,  
simultaneously reserves the right to say no,  
no, it is not acceptable to harm or hurt, insult or exclude one another  
in any way, shape or form, or name, especially God's!

So, welcome home into a religion that engages us to grow in the spirit,  
no matter where we are in life,  
regardless of when or how or why we climbed aboard or stumbled in.

Welcome to the Church of Jesus Christ,  
a Living Hope of seekers & searchers,  
a congregation of saints & sinners mixed up together like mixed nuts.

Welcome to a spirit-filled body of believers and doubters,  
questioners and backsliders, hypocrites and perfectionists,  
Bible thumpers and readers of many words.

The Church is called and commissioned by God and filled with the Holy Spirit  
to help us maintain balance,  
to be a cultural countermeasure,

to be a justifier and place of belonging,  
to be a spark of intelligence with a down home feel,  
to be a provider for the guidance we require for life in the human  
context.

Yet...yet...yet none of this can ever come to be  
if we announce aloud or to ourselves  
that we are done, finished, graduated and completed  
with our Christian education and spiritual maturation.

Bryant Gumbel interviewed the late Maya Angelou on a number of occasions.  
There are a couple exchanges that caught my ear. Here is one introduction:

GUMBEL: *Maya, how you doing? Good morning.*

ANGELOU: *I'm doing well. And you're looking good.*

GUMBEL: *Oh, that's good of you to say. Thank you.*

ANGELOU: *That's the truth. As my sister said, 'The truth is a stubborn fact.'*

Another interview included this insight:

GUMBEL: *So, you are a Christian.*

ANGELOU: *Oh, my goodness, no, I'm not there yet.*

*I am working toward being one. It's a lifetime process.*

'Are you a Christian?' 'Not yet, not yet; I'm working toward being one.'

It takes courage to admit that we are a work in progress.

It takes faith to let God in to rearrange your spirituality.

It takes strength to let yourself to be weak

so the power of God can mold and shape you.

Religion, as its best, connects us to God and one another so we can move closer.

The resurrection, ascension, and incarnation of Jesus into today's culture

lead us not away from our human context but more deeply into it.

Consider what the Bible has to say about this.

After the crucifixion, Jesus was resurrected from the dead into life everlasting.

He returned to earth to connect with his followers.

Jesus connected with Peter and Thomas.

He opened the scriptures for two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

He broke bread with His disciples by the sea.

Time had come to ascend into heaven, and to bless creation with the Spirit.

The Gospel of Luke concludes with the departure of Jesus for heaven.

The Book of Acts, also written by Luke, begins with the departure of Jesus for heaven.

In the Gospel, Jesus ascends to heaven

very late on the first Easter Sunday.  
In the Book of Acts, Jesus ascends to heaven  
after a 40-day period of instructing His followers  
and promising to send the gift of the Holy Spirit.  
The fact that Luke does this--  
having two ascension of Jesus stories,  
back to back that differ in their context and storyline—  
shows that to Luke,  
the point of the ascension is theological.

The point is that “God raised up Jesus and made Christ Lord of all.”

The point is that Jesus fulfilled God’s mission,  
fulfilled the Scriptures and fulfilled our hope.

With this hope, we move forward.  
You are the Class of 2018, and each of you is the class of 2018 in God’s beautiful world.  
Take with you these three thoughts for life and living.

The Learning Never Ends; it is continual.

Learning is constant, ongoing, never ceasing.

“[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...”*

The Lord has given you the capacity for learning, growing, expanding your mind.  
Spiritual maturation is a lifelong process.  
Enjoy! Explore! Engage your mind!

The Blessings Never End; they are continual.

The Lord has blessed you with the Holy Spirit.

*“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.”*

A rabbi once said, “To be blessed is to be made more than what you are.”  
In Christ you are blessed and a blessing.

The Worship Never Ends; it is continual.

*“And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;  
and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”*

We who learn and grow,  
    who are richly blessed,  
        return to give thanks to God,  
            to worship the Lord  
                with all our heart and mind, soul and strength.

The Learning, the Blessings, the Worship never end: they are continual.  
The never-ending spirit of wisdom and hope and love  
    is a gift given to you from on High.

Jesus ascended into heaven, to depart from this earth  
    but not from our lives.  
His lack of physical presence does not mean absence.  
God in Christ stays in touch, connected, bonded,  
    yoked with you and me and all of us together...God abides.

I appreciate the testimonial that speaks to growing and abiding in Christ.  
Entitled *“When I say I am a Christian,”* written by Carol Wimmer, in 1988.

*When I say, “I am a Christian,” I’m not shouting, “I’ve been saved!”  
I’m whispering, “I get lost sometimes that’s why I chose this way”*

*When I say, “I am a Christian,” I don’t speak with human pride  
I’m confessing that I stumble – needing God to be my guide*

*When I say, “I am a Christian,” I’m not trying to be strong  
I’m professing that I’m weak and pray for strength to carry on*

*When I say, “I am a Christian,” I’m not bragging of success  
I’m admitting that I’ve failed and cannot ever pay the debt*

*When I say, “I am a Christian,” I don’t think I know it all  
I submit to my confusion asking humbly to be taught*

*When I say, “I am a Christian,” I’m not claiming to be perfect  
My flaws are far too visible, but God believes I’m worth it*

*When I say, “I am a Christian,” I still feel the sting of pain  
I have my share of heartache which is why I seek God’s name*

*When I say, "I am a Christian," I do not wish to judge  
I have no authority; I only know I'm loved.*

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!