

UP AND OUT

Luke 24: 44-53

May 17, 2026

Millbrook Baptist Church

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On this Seventh Sunday of Easter, we celebrate the ascension of Jesus. The reading you just heard is from the final chapter of Luke's Gospel. In Luke's telling, Resurrection Day is also Ascension Day! This makes the first Easter Sunday a very busy day but more importantly, a consequential day for us as people of faith.

In our Gospel reading, we hear Jesus give the disciples a new mandate, "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here until you have been clothed with power from on high." In this moment a shift occurs for the disciples. They move from being followers of Jesus, to becoming proclaimers of the new life available to all people offered by Jesus.

As the day draws to a close, they follow him to Bethany, the town just outside of Jerusalem where they often stayed. "Bethany" means house or home. It is a familiar place, and it is fitting that Jesus chooses this "home" as the location for both his final leave-taking from the disciples and his own very particular homecoming. An ordinary journey on an extraordinary day! As they arrive, Jesus pauses and raises his wounded hands and blesses them. His last act is to bless! As he blesses, he is taken **up** into heaven.

In the reading from Acts 1 which Pastor Bob read earlier, we hear that two men appear and ask, "why are you standing here, looking **up** toward heaven?" The disciples are stunned! Jesus is there and then suddenly he is not. I imagine that none of them ever forgot that moment.

I invite you to look at the picture on the front of the worship bulletin. It is a mosaic on a church wall which depicts two angels, one on each side of the

ascending Jesus. If we look closely, we can see that they are not gazing **up**. They are gazing **out** at those who enter to worship. They are asking the disciples and each of us to turn our gaze **out** into the world.

In the ways of God, the moment of ascension propelled the disciples forward boldly as they return to Jerusalem, full of joy! Not only that, they also follow Jesus' instructions! The last words in the gospel of Luke tell us they were continually in the temple blessing God! Even in the grief of no longer seeing Jesus, they are empowered and speak boldly. Somehow in his absence, Jesus is still present with them as they bless others!

The ascension, like Jesus' resurrection, is one of those events that we cannot explain. We may want to ask "how" questions! Did Jesus levitate off the ground? Did he just disappear? How far and how fast did he go? Luke does not answer, "How did this happen?" His focus is on answering "why and what". Why did Jesus ascend and what difference does it make that Jesus ascended from us?

Why? Jesus ascended to show us that a lifetime of teaching and being together is not enough to help us understand the ways of God. We often base our agendas on what we know and what we long for. God acts in the ways of the spirit that blows where it will, not bound by our assumptions and our wish lists.

In our own lives we know times of departure and change: child from parent, student from teacher, disciple from mentor. It is often in these shifts, changes, that we find our wings and learn to fly! We also may discover that these transitions lead to a deepening of the relationships we have with key people in our lives. Luke tells us that this is what happens to the disciples. They move from followers to leaders as they return to Jerusalem. They take what they have learned from Jesus and apply it in new ways. They proclaim the Good News boldly!

Truth is, as long as God was in the world in the human person of Jesus, all eyes and hearts were fixed on him. If Jesus had not ascended, we might primarily know of him as a great rabbi and healer whose life made a difference in his home country. And indeed, Jesus' earthly life did make a

difference! Yet, you and I know that God did not send Jesus into the world just to be a local hero, a person of interest.

Jesus showed us who we are to be as his followers and what we are to do. He offers us a guide through the way he lived his life day by day. The gospels are full of accounts of the ways Jesus looked **out**! As he walked the dusty roads of Galilee and the streets of Jerusalem, he was always seeing folks who needed healing, who were seeking peace, who sought help: he sees a man with leprosy and heals him; he sees a woman who is crippled and heals her; he see Zacchaeus a despised tax collector in a tree and he says, “you come down because I am going to your house today!”; he sees a woman about to be stoned and he is her advocate.

What difference does ascension make? The Ascension is a bridge moment between the time of Jesus on earth and the time of the church on earth. It is the beginning of the church’s witness about him. This is the ongoing time in which you and I live. Jesus ascended so that God’s spirit could descend, empowering us to go **out** into the world as we share the Good News! We as the church become the body of Christ in the world when the resurrected body of Jesus ascends.

You, the people called Millbrook Baptist Church, are the body of Christ in the world! One of the joys of being with you again is the reminder of who you are and have been for over 150 years of ministry as you look **out** into the community and larger world and serve others in Jesus’ name. On the bulletin board outside the Fellowship Hall, I recently read two lists of your history of looking out into the community. You have responded to food insecurity in many ways, including most recently paying off lunch meal debts at local elementary schools. You have a long history of caring for the unhoused; now focused on 2nd Street Place, a new shelter which opens in the fall. You have partnered with others to extend your ministry into the larger world as you have partnerships in Honduras and Zimbabwe.

The quote on the front of the bulletin from a member of Millbrook Baptist Church reflects how through the years, you have responded to God’s call: “I think we just tried to be faithful.” Indeed you have not just “tried,” you

have been faithful! Most recently The Paper Mile project reflects how you serve others with great joy as you look **out** and make a difference.

Yesterday I was reminded of how what brings us joy can in turn be a source of blessing for others. Before Bob and I moved back to Raleigh, we lived in Sanford, NC. I was amazed at how many women in the church, and the wider community were Quilters! Some of the women meet weekly at the Lutheran Church to quilt while also enjoying each other's company. This morning the quilters will attend the Lutheran Church for worship as they bless sixty quilts! The quilts will be donated to Camp Victory Junction in Randleman, North Carolina. This camp is for children who are mentally or physically challenged. The camp is designed so that children, no matter their challenges, can attend. Each week is "challenge specific"! For example, a child with Type 1 diabetes whose blood sugar needs to be checked four times a day, is with other children who also need blood checks. There is a counselor for each child. At the end of camp week, each camper goes home with a handmade quilt and a teddy bear! Joy begets joy!

And what happens when our joy spreads and we turn our gaze **out**?! In Acts we hear how these disciples now turned apostles, bless the blind and those who cannot not walk; bless the hungry and the poor; bless the Jews and the Gentiles. Because of the blessing of Jesus as he ascends, the disciples look **out** and find ways to be "channels of blessing, to someone today." They begin to pay it forward! Is it an easy, pain free existence for them? No! Acts also tells of hardships and struggles and persecution. They and we can endure because we do not go out in our own strength. We go out in the name of Jesus. Our orientation changes as we look **out**.

The Ascension was not the conclusion of the redemptive work of Jesus. It marked the handing over of his mission and ministry to his disciples and in turn to their disciples and on down the line to include each of us gathered here. It is an opportunity for all of us, generation to generation, to share the love of Jesus with someone else. Today we focus not on Jesus' departure from us but on his continued presence among us. That is the paradox – in

his ascending we know the presence of Jesus through the gift of the Holy Spirit that descends on us and blesses our lives.

The gifted proclaimer, writer, and theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor says it well:

“Whenever two or three of them got together it was always as if there were someone else in the room with them whom they could not see . . . as familiar to them as each other’s faces. It was almost as if he had not ascended but exploded, so that all the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, flew far and wide, so that the seed of heaven were sown in all the fields of the earth.

We go to church to worship, to acknowledge the Lord’s absence and to seek the Lord’s presence, to sing and to pray, to be silent and to be still, to hold out the empty cups of our hands and to be filled with bread, with wine, with the abiding presence of the absent Lord until he comes again. Do you miss him sometimes? Do you long for assurance that you have not been left behind? Then why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Look around you, look around.” (Barbara Brown Taylor in *Christianity Today*, 5/18/1998)