

**Sermon**  
**Kirk of St James**  
**Sunday June 1, 2025**  
**Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton**

Throughout history there have been countless magnificent pieces of art and sculpture created to celebrate biblical scenes and people. For example Michelangelo's David, or Pieta (where Mary cradles the body of Jesus). Da Vinci's "Last Supper," Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal Son," Raphael's "Transfiguration," or even Dali's "St John of the Cross" (which we have a print of in the parlour). There are the famous mosaics in Ravenna, or even the illuminated manuscript "The Books of Kells." The bible has been the basis of major pieces of art throughout history. However, few depict the moment of the ascension, likely because in part it is a difficult moment to convey with any amount of gravitas. More often than not it is simply a pair of feet disappearing into the clouds in some sort of, "beam me up Scotty" moment.

While it can be an awkward moment to depict artistically, it is one of the most crucial moments for us as Christians. In the gospel of Luke, Luke tells the story of how these eleven disciples arrive at this moment staring up into heaven. The Book of Acts is not a book about what Jesus did—the book of Acts becomes the narrative of what he continues to do through the life and work of his disciples and those who will come to believe throughout history until today. On one hand this is an account of the early church and its growth after Jesus, and it is also about the work he commissioned his followers to do. The ascension is the moment where the life of Jesus and his disciples undergoes a major transition, up until this point Jesus has been teaching them, now it is up to the disciples to continue that work starting in Jerusalem and moving out into the world. Not unlike the path Saul (later Paul) will pursue as he attempts to stamp out the growing Christian movement.

The Book of Acts, as we read this morning starts with Luke using the first few verses to explain to Theophilus what has happened thus far, and the promise of the Holy Spirit. After the initial few verses it is clear the disciples are still struggling to understand

what is coming. They ask Jesus if now is going to be the moment when the Kingdom of Israel is restored. One theologian likens this moment to going on a car trip with children. You no sooner get in, buckled up and on the road when someone starts asking if you are there yet. Unlike a wiggly toddler in the back seat the disciples had reasons to hope that the final vision was coming together. When Jesus was crucified, their hopes for a renewed kingdom vanished. Jesus was not the warrior king they had been expecting. When Jesus rose from the dead confounding all expectations there must have been a resurgence of hope. This guy can even beat a Roman execution can you imagine the power and possibility that now exists.

The disciples are asking this question with hope for the future and the hope of a restored kingdom must have felt like it was now in reach. However, just as Jesus overcame death, the disciples would have to find a way past their previous notions of what the kingdom of God would look like. "Like everything else the dream of the kingdom had been transformed through Jesus' death and resurrection. Just as Jesus told them they would have to lose their lives to save them, so now he had to explain that they had to lose their kingdom-dreams-of an earthly kingdom with ordinary administrative and government power, in charge of subject states-in order to gain them." The kingdom of God as revealed through the life, teaching and parables of Jesus was constantly turning expectations upside down. The Kingdom Jesus has been revealing to them, where the lost are welcomed, the broken healed, the poor blessed, the child welcomed, and the widowed cared for is the kingdom of God.

The two figures come down from the heavens as the disciples are standing there staring up to remind them that they need to go back into the world. The disciples were working out their understanding of the Kingdom the same way we do ourselves, and even our churches. There have been times in history where it was believed that you needed to dress a certain way, look or act a certain way to be part of the church. We have gone through periods of history where we have gone totally astray and have lost sight of God's kingdom. We focus on our preconceived ideas of what the kingdom looks like and when

what we value becomes what we practice and how we act. One scholar asked what best expresses your congregations understanding of kingdom? Is it the kingdom of survival where you are trying to keep something going? Is it a congregation of activity where you have countless opportunities to serve each week? Is it the kingdom of consumption where everything needs to be bigger and better and more entertaining? Is it neat or is it messy? Is the kingdom only within your walls? Or do you see it outside of them? Who does the kingdom include? We forget that the disciples had to constantly keep expanding their vision and understanding in order to follow the commission of Jesus.

Here at the Kirk we are constantly trying to grow and expand our idea of the kingdom. We don't always get it right but we try. Over the last couple of years we have had a lot of pieces moving around and trying to come together as we wrestled with our identity as Christians and being a part of this community and how we see our mission in the wider world. It has been a lot of meetings. Our restoration and improvement group have been working on the physical building and how it can better serve our needs. The sustainability committee has been looking at how to be good stewards of our gifts. The New Beginnings work as a congregation, and the session have been working how we answer our call to the community. You likely have heard me referencing these things, and wondering at how time passes, and if any of it is going to come to fruition.

I once read a reflection that comes from a book called *This Odd and Wondrous Calling* by Lillian Daniels. She was in a Board of Trustees meeting and they were discussing the meal the Church was serving at a homeless shelter later that week, afterwards she wrote the following:

“The heated discussion is about the correct recipe for chili mac, that strange American casserole...we sit through a 45 minute discussion about chili mac. Do you get the large cans of chili or the small ones? Does anyone have a membership to a discount warehouse? And then there is a particularly contentious issue: should we buy the grated cheese or grate it ourselves? Someone remembers they do not have a cheese grater at the shelter. Should we buy one or just spend extra on the grated cheese? Let's do a cost comparison, someone

suggests whipping out a calculator. Just as we are nearing a decision, a new board member asks, “Why do we always make chili mac?...Now its been 50 minutes. On chilli mac. This moment is eternity. I am losing my religion. I have lost my eschatology. Fifty-one minutes...Sometimes it takes holy imagination just to remember a call, to imagine one, not in the sense that the call is an illusion created by us, but when we imagine, we see what we do not know; we see the possibilities God has for us...Christ crucified and resurrected prepares us to find majesty in the ordinary, mystery in the concrete, love in the midst of feuding, a ministry of tending to the details in the midst of grated cheese. “I’d hate to be homeless, on a night of cold like this,” one of the trustees says. And for a minute the clerk puts down his pen, the calculator is pushed aside, and everyone is silent, and I feel as if I hear God’s pen making a scratchy note in the book of our cherished lives. And then the meeting goes on, to the Church space requests and the broken window panes, but there was that moment when we were all quiet, and we could hear each other breathe...that was the moment that was really eternity. Grace had broken in and carried us soaring into minute 54.”

I know it has been a long process here too, but friends that is because we have not stood staring up into heaven. Instead we have done our best to move into the world in faith and hope. It has been slow in some respects but I was talking to some people this week where I said I feel like all the pieces are starting to pull together. I don’t want to jinx things so I am knocking on wood, but the faithfulness of so many of you, even when it has felt like the 50<sup>th</sup> minute Daniels spoke of is incredible.

We are assured by Jesus that when we go into this world we go with the gift and the strength of the Holy Spirit. I see before me incredible heart, love, commitment and hope. We don’t do things because we should, we do them because we care and we are a people of living faith, trying our best to live into God’s call.