

Ascension Sunday... something we may not have emphasized much over the years, but surely from art galleries, especially in Europe, we have seen paintings of Jesus in a cloud, or ascending up into a cloud. Like many of the miracles in the Bible, we could get stuck on trying to figure out exactly what happened. The story of Jesus' ascension is similar to some stories of his resurrection appearances... how he would suddenly appear in a room that was locked, how he would talk to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus at dinner, then suddenly vanish from their sight, how he said to Mary Magdalene, "don't cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father." Quite a mystery! It does seem very clear, however, that like Moses and Elijah, there was never a permanent physical grave for Jesus; his body was never found. If it were, there would have been a lot of reports and writing about where Jesus' body finally rested.

So we are left with the testimonies and the conclusion that Jesus was both an embodied self and a spiritual self... that Jesus was fully human and also fully Divine. Yes, a paradox, a mystery. Rather than letting this be a stumbling block that causes us to dismiss stories and miracles regarding Jesus, I find comfort that faith in God and faith in Jesus both require "leaps of faith," an openness to mystery and spirit that is truly "beyond" our rational understanding, beyond our earthly way of proving things. It is saying that there is a spirit world, a world that goes "beyond" our physical bodies.

So this Ascension Sunday points to both the earthly and heavenly aspects of Jesus, his body and his spirit, and to the fact that we are both body and spirit. We come to worship, to focus on the things of the spirit, the beauty of God, the mercy and forgiveness, the love of God. There can also be new "power," in worship, due to a new attitude, a new birth, a new hope, etc. There can be new power, as we let go of burdens, let go of guilt, let go of things that enslave us. This

gives us an inner sense of peace, “Come to me and I will give you rest,” Jesus says. Such rest, such peace, is restoring, rejuvenating, encouraging, strengthening, etc. Before ascending, Jesus tells them, wait here in Jerusalem until power comes upon you, until you are “clothed” with power from on high. Jesus knew about the renewal and rejuvenation in prayer and worship.

God’s love, Jesus’ love, not only empowers us individually, from the inside out, but truly we are empowered by sensing the love and grace in those around us who are also “in Christ.” When those around us are taking that inner journey with Christ, growing in his love and grace, we are strengthened by such others, strengthened by the community. And the community of Christ has been called “the church.” The letter to the Ephesians speaks of Christ as being the “head of the church,” and our UCC, United Church of Christ has taken this teaching as a key tenet of our community. It matters not exactly how we follow or how we believe in Jesus, just that we do follow him, as best we can!

Jesus’ love is self-giving; it is powerful, and it is expansive, so it grows.... not only inside ourselves, but it is contagious. Like the song says, “Love isn’t love until you give it away.” God’s love, in Christ, relational, compassionate, and actively serving.

At the risk of embarrassing a few of you, or of leaving out some important things... In no particular order:

-Welcome Phil! ... Phil makes friends easily (Choral society!), and is a Troubadour for Christ, a great singer of hope... you should see the many gigs he does in elderly housing, and how he engages the residents. And we know that Phil loves to tell stories and teach, as he did in the classroom.

-Welcome Vonnie! ... A real trooper (got have staying power to support the ever-moving Phil!), Vonnie is a dedicated mother, to

children and grandchildren, a trained speech therapist, an open-minded learner, and she has much compassion for others.

-Welcome Rob!... Rob is a dedicated servant to our Zoom ministry, big hearted, and did you know - he's a talented drummer, and also plays piano and sings? And did you know he won a championship tennis match in his school days?

-Welcome Rachel!... maybe no overhead smashes like Rob, but Rachel knows a lot about smash-burgers! She was a good waitress, a good listener who often knew what diners wanted before they ordered, and now she listens a lot in full-time social work, and treats special needs clients with extra-mile care. We welcome her confidence... even when she corrects the preacher!

-Welcome Sandra! ... Do you know that Sandra was an interior decorator? Do you know that she planned big fundraisers at fancy estates in Danvers? (We might benefit from her experience!) Do you know that she has worked in the field of mental illness? (She has a heart for youth and young adults who need a place of care and safety...she is meditating on ways we might invite and care for youth!)

-Welcome Bea!... Bea has such a sweet, kind spirit. Do you know that she is a live-in care giver for Barry, a retired dentist, who became blind in his 40's? Respite care for his wife is now so necessary; he would love to get out in the fresh air more often. Barry has only superlative words for Bea, for her love and care. And we honor Bea pursuing studies in the nursing field.

-Welcome Shenae!... Shenae has an earnest faith that is seeking to know much more about God, Jesus, and the Bible. Shenae is also a steady advocate for the LGBTQ community, to pray for them all, and to put a stop to any injustices we see. And being a Generation Z, she recently showed her technological smarts... In our orientation gathering, Peggy's smart watch went off, saying "emergency,

emergency.” At first, no one knew how to silence the watch, but then Shenae just shouted at the watch, “Be quiet, there is no emergency here!”

-And last but not least, Welcome Keith! Keith is a teacher, who is a life-long learner! Do you know that he goes to at least THREE language conversation groups at the Senior Center: Spanish, French and German! And Keith surely has a “servant heart:” helping in Thrift Shop, helping give rides to people who can’t drive, and perhaps the most amazing display of spirit, (the power and the expansiveness of spirit) is how Keith has **invited** quite a few folks to come and experience our worship and community. He has done this in Jesus’ inclusive love, not in any proselytizing of dogma or doctrine. He is embodying the spirit of an old Belleville brochure, that “the way we treat one another is more important than the doctrines we may hold.” Come and feel the support of a community that take seriously Jesus’ admonition to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

So, this Ascension day we celebrate the mystical union of God with Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ with us and us with one another. It is a union of “love” as respect, as compassion, as service. It is a love that always connecting, always expanding, with a power that gives us new hope and new life! Let us now formally and ceremonially welcome our newer friends in Christ.

Amen.