**Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway**

**United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96817**

**Online Worship & Sermon May 24, 2020**

**SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

**ASCENSION OF THE LORD SUNDAY**

PRELUDE Jieun Kim Newland

Prelude from Prelude, Fugue and Ciacona in C Major | Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707)

ANNOUNCEMENTS Lori Yamashiro

GREETING/CALL TO WORSHIP **—**Psalm 47

Shout for joy, sing songs of praise;

**For God reigns over all the earth!**

God has gone up with a shout!

**Sound the trumpets and sing songs of praise!**

OPENING SENTENCES

Today is Ascension Sunday, the last Sunday before Pentecost. Today we remember what Christ endured so that we might live with him. Today, we also celebrate his return to God in glory. So, as we worship, let us offer humble and joyous thanks for all he did for us, and for all who would respond to his claim.

With his disciples, let us hear the story, and behold with awestruck wonder his triumphant ascension, hailing him as prophet, priest and sovereign. Christ was faithful to God from the first to the last, even at the price of a horrible death. Let us, with God’s help, also remain faithful—in our worship, our witness, our service.

PRAYER SEEKING Reconciliation

*Let us prepare ourselves to receive God’s gift of holy Scripture*

*by setting aside all that burdens our hearts and spirits.*

Jesus tells us that repentance and forgiveness —Luke 24:46-53;

is to be offered in his name. Ephesians 1:15-23

Therefore, let us confess our sins to God,

who assures us of new life

through the power of Christ’s redeeming love.

Let us pray (together): — Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

**Living God, we confess that our faith is sometimes weak. Our love for others can be faint, our prayers are often timid, and our gratitude is frequently unconvincing. When we stand looking toward heaven, yet feel far from you, you draw near in mercy to remind us of what has already been done for us through Christ. So, Lord, open our eyes to this love of yours that we may be filled with your power. We pray this through the grace of Jesus, our resurrected Savior. Amen.**

Let us keep a short silence to reflect on what we have prayed.

AN Assurance

Sisters and brothers,

as Christ is our witness,

God’s power to pardon is immeasurable.

Therefore, proclaim this good news to the ends of the earth:

through the mercy of Christ, our sins are forgiven.

PASSING THE PEACE OF GOD

A READING FROM HOLY SCRIPTURE Arthur Goto

Acts 1:1-14 *“The Ascension of Jesus”*

*1‘In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. ‘This’, he said, ‘is what you have heard from me; 5for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’*

*6So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ 7He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’*

*12Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. 13When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.*

SERMON *“People, Get Ready”* Pastor Jeannie Thompson

I had a friend once, her name was Arleen, who told me a story from her childhood that reminds me of this morning’s Bible passage. When Arleen was about seven years old, her mother gave her a couple of dollars and told her to walk down to the grocery store on the corner and buy some bread for the family’s dinner.

Arleen had been learning in school about the earth and the solar system. She had been told that the earth is constantly rotating, turning, and moving. In her seven-year-old mind, this meant that she was moving along with it. And if she was already moving because of the earth, then this meant she did not have to walk anywhere at all because (surely) the movement of the earth would carry her along to wherever she wanted to go.

She decided to test this theory by sitting down on the curb outside her house and waiting. She waited for a very long time. She waited so long that her mother—worried that she had not yet returned from the corner store—came out to look for her.

After a good bit of explanation and persuasion between mother and daughter, Arleen finally got up and made the short trip to the corner store.

Arleen had learned a bit of the amazing nature of the movement of the stars and planets. Filled with wonder she had decided that all of the heavenly bodies, the laws of physics, the phenomenon of gravity, velocity, and geography were working together so that she could work less. Indeed, in her mind, all of these things were calculated precisely for her benefit—she was the center of all of that movement.

Well, she wasn’t *completely* wrong. All of those things *are* precisely calculated—which is to say: they are organized into a harmony that results in activity, and all of these things have been part of the production of life as we know it. However, the labor saving part of her equation is the part where her, and often our, reasoning begins to break down.

That is why this story of Jesus’ Ascension is so important—because Jesus takes into account how humans tend to make themselves the center of things. And so, as Jesus readies himself to ascend he speaks to the disciples—and us—of what God has and is doing.

God is doing a *new* thing. God is bringing God’s love into the world and, yes, it is a benefit to us—but even more: it is the nature of who God is. The whole story of Jesus—his whole life, ministry, death, and resurrection—all of these things have come to pass because God wants us to truly receive the great gift of love and life, and life everlasting. All of these miraculous, earth changing things have been accomplished because God is love.

In regards to the disciples: the life they are offered will not be a return to the past they have known, nor the future they, themselves, may want. The life they were being offered was to be built on their obedience to the instructions they have been given from Christ, and the guidance we will receive from the Holy Spirit.

This is where we find the disciples and Jesus in this passage. Forty days after Jesus’ resurrection, he is ready to depart the physical world for good. Once again, he must get the disciples ready for their future. So, he tells them what they are to do next.

They do not get to have him with them as he has been—there is no return to that past. They do not get to have the resurrected Jesus alone with them either, he has another part of his own story to fulfill—and so do the disciples.

There on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gives his disciples a strategy for implementing the resurrection life of the new creation in the present. After three years of instruction and training they must begin their work. And so now, as he ascends to take his place with the Father, he commissions his disciples to carry on his work until he returns to bring it to completion. They are to bless and heal in his name. They are to teach and proclaim the good news.

They have work to do.

If it were up to the disciples, Jesus would bring about the restoration of Israel. His resurrection would be the beginning of the end of Roman rule and domination. It would be a return to the past glory. They want what they have known. They want the kingdom and the power that used to be theirs.

Jesus, however, came to establish a new world, founded on the power of God’s love. Neither his nor God’s power will be used for one peoples’ political aspirations. Instead, they are to follow a way of life that will bring people together as community.

That is an important message for us—we are not asked to each take God’s word and live it out alone. The disciples and we were asked to wait *together* for the Holy Spirit. The power they will receive from him is a power that is meant to unite people—not set one over another.

It was expected that the disciples—while they were waiting—would also help and support one another. I expect they did this by helping some of the newer disciples by telling them Jesus’ story, and by discussing what it meant—offering insight and understanding. To tell Jesus’ story meant that they needed to learn the longer history of God among the human community, and so there must have been a good deal of Bible study, training, and education. This, too, was preparation—so that they, too, will be able to share the story with others.

In this way, their waiting was not a sedate or idle time. It was a time of great growth and expansion of the heart and mind. This is the way they were called upon to channel their energy that would most likely have pursued their own lines of thought; their own desires.

This is what continues to amaze me about God: God always seem to know what we need to hear, and just when we need to hear it. What I want to say is that: this passage speaks very much to our life together here in Nu‘uanu Congregational Church. God is truly speaking to us through this passage.

We, too, have been waiting and preparing for the next part of our adventure with God. This is what the *New Beginnings* work was all about.

I was just given all of that material during the last two weeks. I was very impressed with all of the work that you, and the *New Beginnings* consultants have done together. Obviously, you want to continue the journey this congregation has been on with Christ for all of these years, and you have done a lot of work to move on into the future.

Like the disciples at the beginning of the Bible story we heard, it may feel like we are standing around staring at the sky—not moving, or doing much of anything.

What I would like to ask you to do is to be patient a bit longer. We are not going to stay in this position forever. There is a bit more we are called upon to do. However, while we wait, we must not be idle.

What I ask you to do is to hold all that you know about God’s love and this church in prayer. Also, and very importantly, let your thoughts and prayers be shaped and guided by Holy Scripture—allow God’s word to sink deeply into your heart and mind.

Finally, open yourself to new ways, new experiences, new people, new life—because this is what it means to receive the Holy Spirit.

When I read this passage from Acts, I find myself wondering just how long the disciples would have stood there gaping up at the sky. I wonder how long before their necks began to hurt; how long before they finally lowered their heads on their own and…I wonder what they would have done then.

Thank goodness for mothers like Arleen’s who find us, and her, and send us on our way.

Thank goodness for the angels who found the disciples staring up at the sky and brought them back down to earth.

Most of all, thank God for the Holy Spirit who is going to blow away all of the cobwebs of the past, and lead us into a new life with God. It will be very different than the life we have known, but if we open our lives to it, the Holy Spirit is going to take us into new paths and new horizons that will honor our past, and deeply bless the future.

So, make yourself ready for next Sunday, when we will celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, and let God make you ready for the road God will put before us.

May you be blessed with a hopeful and joyful heart at this good news.

Amen.

HYMN OF RESPONSE *“It is Well With My Soul”* Kristen Young

*We invite you to sing along with Kristen.*

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION & THE LORD’S PRAYER

*Let there be a brief time of silence after each petition.*

Let us not cease to give thanks to God who has seated the resurrected and ascended Christ at the right hand of the Holy One in power and great glory.

Let us pray:

We give thanks to you, O God, in this and every age, for the healing power at work in Christ to fill our world with grace,

O risen God, **fill us with your power.**

We pray for our world, for all leaders, people and nations that they and we may exercise a spirit of wisdom as we serve the common good. Shield all who suffer the terrors of violence and war; bring them to safety and new life in you. Make us one family gathered up in your love and clothed in the power of your peace.

O risen God, **fill us with your power.**

We pray for all who long to experience the immeasurable power of your love. Open our hearts to sing your praises and to share the story of your blessing, that all may come to know our living and ascended Christ.

O risen God, **fill us with your power.**

Bless your people everywhere with food, shelter, healthcare, and employment sufficient for our flourishing, that all may thrive together by the riches of your grace, and fill us with a joy for justice that inspires us to do our part for the prosperity for all.

O risen God, **fill us with your power.**

We pray for all in sickness or in need, that they may know your healing love and the power of Christ to bring life in the most difficult places and times. Keep us mindful of the hope and great power that we have in you as we offer your healing to others.

O risen God, **fill us with your power.**

We pray for all who have died, that, together, you will bring us to our glorious inheritance of Christ, the one who fills all in all.

O risen God, **fill us with your power.**

We pray this in the name of him who was raised to live and reign in power for us,

Our Lord and Savior. Jesus Christ who taught us to pray saying, “*Our Creator, who art in heaven…”*

DOXOLOGY

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

Praise God all creatures here below;

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Praise God above, ye heavenly host;

Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

**BENEDICTION**

May the glory of God fill you with praise,

the beauty of Christ strengthen you in service,

and the power of the Holy Spirit fill you with peace.

POSTLUDE Jieun Kim Newland

Ciacona from Prelude, Fugue and Ciacona in C Major | Buxtehude