

## ***Worship, Witness and Service***

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### **Gathering**

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#### **Call to Worship**

Are you searching for God, but do not know where to look?

Don't worry - God knows where you are.

Are you searching for faith, but do not know what to believe?

Don't worry - you are not alone.

Would you love to be able to sing, but do not have the voice for it?

Don't worry - our joined voices will strengthen each other.

Would you love to be able to pray, but cannot find the words?

Don't worry - Christ is praying for you, as we pray with each other.

*Adapted from Spill The Beans, Edition 38, Resources for Sunday 16 May 2021, p.149*



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### **Readings**

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#### **Luke 24:44-53**

<sup>44</sup> 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.'

<sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup>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, <sup>47</sup>and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup>You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup>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.'

<sup>50</sup> Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. <sup>51</sup>While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. <sup>52</sup>And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; <sup>53</sup>and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

#### **Acts 1:1-11**

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning <sup>2</sup>until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After 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. <sup>4</sup>While 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; <sup>5</sup>for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' <sup>7</sup>He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father

has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>But 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.' <sup>9</sup>When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup>While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup>They 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.'

Hear what God's Spirit is saying to the church.

**Thanks be to God**

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### Reflection

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Loving God, thank you for all those past and present who have shared their testimony with us. Help us live as faithful witnesses in our time and reflect your redemptive love. Spirit of God fall afresh on us today. Amen.

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for 16 May 2021, p.178*

So here is a memory test - can you remember back to before Easter, when we looked at John 12 where Jesus said:

<sup>32</sup>And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' (John 12:32)

We talked then about how God's presence is known in Jesus being lifted up in three different events: on the cross, in his resurrection and in his ascension.

Over the past weeks, we have remembered Jesus' death on the cross, we have celebrated resurrection, and today, we think about ascension.

Somehow God's presence is known in Jesus' ascension...

There is no doubt that this story is one that takes its place amongst some of the more unusual stories of the gospels. What we have heard this morning is two different accounts of that story from the same author - whoever wrote the gospel of Luke, also wrote the book of Acts. The two books go together - and where the gospel is an account of Jesus' life, the book of Acts is an account of what happened next as the disciples begin to understand their call to ministry and to share the news of Jesus Christ with the world.

Before Jesus leaves,

- he helps them understand that he is the fulfilment of everything the prophets had said about the Messiah (Luke 24:46-47)
- he talks to them about the reign of God (Acts 1:3) - God's vision or dream for all the world, the alternative to the oppression and violence of the kingdom they knew, the Roman Empire
- he reminds them that they are witnesses (Luke 24:48) / that they will be witnesses (Acts 1:8). A witness is someone who has personal knowledge of a person or event and can testify or tell others about that experience. Interestingly, the Greek word we translate here as witness is the same word from which we get the word "martyr" - someone who is prepared to die or sacrifice enormously for the sake of what they believe - witness/martyr - in Greek it is the same thing
- he promises them that the Holy Spirit would come to them (Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4-5, 8)

In the Uniting Church, we often describe ourselves in terms of "worship, witness and service".

In the Basis of Union, the founding document of the Uniting Church, we describe the Congregation as "the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ." (*Basis of Union*, para 15(a)).

We commit ourselves to worship - gathering together to praise God, to pray, to explore the Scriptures together.

We commit ourselves to witness - sharing our own stories of our encounters with Jesus, even the stories that are costly to us, the stories that show our vulnerability, the stories that perhaps might seem to an outsider, a bit unreal, the stories that show how Jesus has changed our lives and the stories that offer transformation into a hurting world.

And we commit ourselves to service - we commit ourselves to enacting God's realm in the world we encounter - in the choices we make, in the way we engage with people around us, in the way we care for the most vulnerable in our communities.

And then, as Jesus finishes speaking, it is variously described that Jesus is taken from their view, taken into heaven (Luke 24:51), lifted up and hidden in the clouds (Acts 1:9).

In the version in Acts we get this lovely little piece where Jesus has disappeared from their sight and the disciples are left gazing up at the sky.

You can imagine this group of people all with their mouths open just gazing into the sky, can't you?

When a couple of men in white robes ask them: why are you looking at the sky?

This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.' (Acts 1:11)

In Luke's gospel they do what Jesus had told them to and return to Jerusalem with great joy to wait (24:52) continually praising God in the temple (24:53).

In the story as it is told in Acts, there is a sense here too of another "in between time". Just as the disciples had to live through the in-between of Easter Saturday, the in-between of death to resurrection, the unknowing of what might come next; here again, they are in-between - in-between Jesus leaving them and the coming of the Holy Spirit, in-between a new understanding of Jesus and his ministry and an even greater understanding of the ministry to which they are all called themselves.

The in-between is important - it can't be avoided - just as we can't skip quickly from death to resurrection, nor can we always move immediately from renewed zeal or understanding to action. But that also doesn't mean we get to stay in the in-between doing nothing - there is a time and a place and an imperative to act - as the Holy Spirit comes amongst us empowering and inspiring us. Sometimes the Spirit comes quietly and gently, but next week we will hear the story of the Spirit coming in a way that leaves us in no doubt of our call to be about God's work in the world.

And so I wonder - where are you in the story? Where are we in the story?

Are you still staring into the sky wondering where Jesus is gone, perhaps still processing what you have just seen and heard?

Are you "in-between"?

Or are you joining with companions and disciples to be about the work of ministry in the world - worshipping our Creator, witnessing to the boundless love of God and serving the world for whom Christ died.

Let us pray...

God, hold us in the in-between times:

In between our knowing we have messed up, and figuring out what to do next;

in between our discovering our complicity, and taking a different path;

In between our collapsing with exhaustion, and picking ourselves up and trying again;

in between our deeper understanding of your love and our working out how to express that in the world.

If we find ourselves staring into the sky wondering where you are, touch us again and send us into your world to worship you, to witness to your love and to serve your world. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Rev Kath Merrifield

16 May 2021