

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Ascension Sunday
May 17, 2026
9:30 AM

Texts: Luke 24:44-53

Theme: Hope: Sharing Your Story

[prayer]

Last week we celebrated the life of one of our devoted members, John Adams. The flowers here today in front of the altar were given in his memory. I emphasized at John's memorial service that every person in attendance had a story to share about John, a memory of how his life had touched theirs. We were blessed to hear some of those stories during the service. Every time I officiate a funeral, I marvel at the unique ways God uses a person's life to positively impact the lives of other people. We may associate the word "impact" with grand, heroic gestures. But it is the cumulative effect of small kindnesses, small deeds done with great love, that make the biggest impact and leave a legacy of hope.

Ascension Sunday – the day we remember Jesus's ascension into heaven – is a good day to reflect on legacy, particularly the legacy that Jesus has left us. Part of this legacy is the experience of *agape* love – a universal and unconditional love that transcends all boundaries and circumstance. This love originates from God and is the lifeblood of the Church, pumped by the very heart of Jesus through the members of his Body. We are divinely related to each other as sisters and brothers through the reconciling blood of Christ.

That *agape* love, that new definition of kinship, was modelled by Christ and his disciples. As they gathered around Jesus, the disciples lived into a more expansive definition of family. As they walked along the sea of Galilee, following this itinerant rabbi from Nazareth, their sense of kinship with each other grew deeper and deeper, tested by the trial of their beloved teacher's crucifixion and then reborn in the moment of his resurrection.

And now in today's scripture, they stand, miraculously reunited with Jesus who they once thought dead, only to watch him leave them again. Goodbyes are hard, but I imagine that particular goodbye was perhaps the hardest.

Isaac Villegas, a Mennonite pastor, wrote about when he sat with an Amish bishop just days before Ascension Day. He asked the bishop how the Amish commemorate Jesus's ascension. The bishop's response was surprising. He remarked that the Amish believe Ascension is more important than Easter. And unlike Easter, it is not a time of celebration. Instead, it is a time of mourning and fasting. Ascension, the bishop said, is "a time for lament because that's when we remember that Jesus left us behind – that's when he left us here."¹

The Church is a community organized around the absence of a body – the absence of Christ's physical body in our midst.

Like the disciples on that Day of Ascension, we may sometimes find ourselves staring into the heavens, wondering where Jesus has gone and when, or ever, he will be back. On days when the world feels too precarious, the news streaming damning headline after damning headline, and it seems like the human species is just one step away from self-destruction – we may wonder what Jesus was thinking leaving us here in this mess. The fragility of our lives cries out for rescue – rescue from failures that haunt us, worries that harass us, bodies that get sick and die. Now that I think about it, the Amish bishop's statement that Ascension Day is for mourning and fasting makes good sense.

The Church is a community organized around the absence of a body, and the Church is a community waiting for its return. We are waiting for Christ to return.

But in the meantime, he has left behind signs of his presence – in the waters of baptism; in the bread and the cup; and most importantly, in you and in me.

Christ said to his disciples before he ascended, "You are witnesses of these things" (v. 48).

Let me tell you a secret: I have seen Jesus. I have seen Jesus in this place. I have seen Jesus in your faces and in your stories, which you have been so generous to

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/may-10-ascension-lord-luke-24-44-53>

share with me. The form of Christ's body is made clear to me every time I pray with you and you with me; at every potluck meal we share in the Fellowship Hall; in the hospitality of your homes and conversations by the wayside. I have been present to your joy and present to your grief; officiated funerals and visited sickbeds; smeared ashes on your foreheads and pressed communion bread into your cupped palms; celebrated weddings and presided at baptisms; and in all of those moments, Jesus was present, too. Jesus was here, sharing in our fellowship and our ministry together.

How do we discern the absent and ascended body of Christ? We discern it wherever a community of believers is gathered in his name, seeking to do his will and sharing in his *agape* love. "Where two or three are gathered," Jesus said, "I am there among them" (Matt 18:20). When we are filled with despair for ourselves and future generations, we need only look to each other for the reassurance that hope is still alive. The living hope we have in our Lord in heaven also exists here on earth in our own flesh, in this time and place, gathered in sacred, covenant community. We are the Body of Christ.

At the Ascension, Christ commissions his disciples to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all the nations (vv. 47-48). With the promise of power from on high, he commissions them to be his witnesses. His parting words are a benediction for the journey to come. And this blessing as he ascends, followed then by the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, constitutes the formation of the Church. At the Ascension the Church began. We began as a small group of Jesus-followers with our eyes turned toward the sky, watching Jesus ascend into heaven and wondering when he would be back. In the earliest days of the Church, the expectation was that Jesus was coming back *imminently*. The first generation of Christians were convinced this would happen before they died.

Two thousand years later and our understanding of imminence has become a little more flexible. We still believe Jesus is coming back soon, but we know God's definition of 'soon' is radically different than ours. Eventually that small group of disciples took their eyes off the sky and looked around them and realized that they were now the body of Christ in the world – Jesus's ministry was now their ministry. So, while their hearts remained fixed on the things of eternity, their eyes began to focus on the mission at hand: God's kingdom come, God's will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven.

At the Ascension, Jesus's story becomes our story, and we become his body. Our stories of faith become an extension of his, a living witness to the living hope we have received. In today's reading from the first chapter of Ephesians, Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus from his prison cell in Rome, a seemingly hopeless situation. And yet he is filled with hope because of the faithful witness that is being made by his fellow believers. He writes,

Beloved, I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you...I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him...[God] has put all things under [Jesus's] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, is the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Paul defines a saint as one who has set their hope in Christ and chooses to make their life a witness for the Gospel. Ephesians describes all those who have heard and believed the good news of salvation as saints. A saint is someone who receives the good news of Jesus, responds in faith, and allows that good news to transform the way they live their life so that their life becomes a witness to Jesus.

Think about a believer – a saint – in your own life. Perhaps they are still alive, perhaps they have long since passed. Think of their words, their actions, the way they live or lived. What about their life gives you hope? How do they inspire you to believe? How do they inspire you to act?

As we continue our Annual Giving Appeal this week and faithfully pray over what we might be able to financially contribute to the ministry of the church, we must also pray about the offering we are making with our lives. The money we put in the offering plate is the least portion of what God asks us to give. God commands us to give our whole selves so that he can use the entirety of our lives to bless and build His kingdom.

Last week I spoke of generosity sowing seeds of hope. Generosity is just one fruit of a life that has been yielded to God. There is no greater testament to the living hope we have in Jesus Christ than the way we live our lives, especially in the face of disappointment, hardship, oppression, and suffering. Too many people place their hope in temporal promises and are drowning in despair. They are seeking

hope but do not know where to turn. As Christians, we are called to share our stories of how Christ has worked in our lives and the ways he has made all the difference for us. Our stories can become a source of hope for others. Which is why our final spiritual practice that cultivates hope – the practice that incorporates all the others: worship, prayer, acts of service and generosity – is our witness. We must never neglect our witness as individual disciples or as a church.

Like Jesus blessing his disciples before he ascended, at the end of worship, I will lift up my hands and speak a blessing over you all. This blessing is not merely a hopeful wish. This blessing is a commissioning. I am commissioning you – each and every one of you – to go forth in the power of God and be the Body of Christ in the world. I am echoing the words of Christ – “You are witnesses of these things” – and then sending you out into the world to be just that – his witnesses.

My friends, you are the fullness of Christ in this place. May your lives proclaim the immeasurable greatness of his power and the eternal hope to which he has called you.

Amen.