

# Ascension of the Lord

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 12 May 2024

A Reflection by Rev David Gill

Easter 7 B

**Contemporary Reading: *The Collage of God* by Mark Oakley; Acts 1:1-11;  
Luke 24:44-53**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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If you were writing one of the four gospels, how would you end it?

Would you conclude the story of Jesus of Nazareth with the day of his execution? No, not possible. Or after the first of his resurrection appearances, ignoring the others? Hardly. Yet his earthly life was over.

How could you wrap it up in a manner that echoed faithfully what that life had been all about?

The question, how to conclude, seems to have bothered all four gospel writers. And for good reason. How does one stop telling a story that itself has not stopped?

Matthew's gospel, for example, ends with what at first seems to be a tidy conclusion. On a hillside in Galilee, the risen Lord gives the eleven remaining disciples his great commission: go, baptize, teach. But then he adds: "*I am with you always, to the close of the age*". What sort of ending is it, when the main character is still on the scene, promising to remain there?

Mark's conclusion, probably added well after the rest of his gospel, refers briefly to Christ's rising, his commission and his ascending to heaven. It's a clunky ending, leading many to think the original conclusion has been lost.

The fourth gospel, John's, has the risen Lord telling Peter to be a good shepherd and "*feed my sheep*". Then there's a verse saying Jesus did many other things that aren't written down. Then it just stops.

For the writer of the third gospel, there was an additional complication. Whoever wrote Luke didn't just pen the gospel that's over his name. He also wrote the Acts of the Apostles. So the author faced the threefold question: how to end the story of the earthly Jesus? How to begin the story of the post-resurrection church? And how to connect the two?

With the story of Christ's ascension, that's how. Luke took a conviction that was well established among early believers and presented it in narrative form.

We heard it a few minutes ago. The risen Lord assures his friends of a God-given power to be his witnesses. Then he is lifted up into a cloud – in biblical thinking, a sign of God’s presence. He passes from their sight into heaven – as they thought of it, God’s dwelling place.

The Ascension was marked, in the calendar of Western (Catholic and Protestant) churches, last Thursday. Think of it as the second of two bookends, bracketing an extraordinary life. The Jesus saga had begun with angels, a virgin birth and a star, signaling a divine initiative. Now it is ended with an equally powerful signal.

The Son returns to share in the glory of the Father. The man of the cross takes his place on the throne of heaven. What he was, what he taught, the self-emptying love he embodied, is stamped with an authority that is divine, universal, enduring.

To us, of course, all this sounds strange. We don’t think miracles, mysterious clouds, a three-story universe with heaven up there, hell down there and humanity existing nervously in between. Our minds work differently. What, then, might the Ascension amount to, for us?

Just this. Using the genre of story-telling, it dramatizes the conviction expressed in the church’s earliest, simplest, most basic credal statement: namely, Christ is Lord!

Ponder the staggering implications of that conviction. Jesus Christ -- crucified, risen and ascended -- is sovereign Lord of all.

Oh yes, we know only too well the signs that point the other way. Pain, suffering and death are real. Hearts and lives do break. Evil does still flaunt its monstrous power. But the darkness, we know, is not the end of the story.

Christ’s triumph has not only put evil in its place. It has revealed all lesser claims to authority for what they are. It has relativized and dethroned them.

At the height of South Africa’s struggle against apartheid, Archbishop Desmond Tutu frequently found himself at loggerheads with the country’s minister of law and order.

On one occasion, exasperated by the minister’s intransigence, Desmond boiled over. *“Mr Minister,”* he said, *“we must remind you that you are not God. You are just a man. And one day your name will be merely be a faint scribble on the pages of history, while the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, shall live forever”.*

Ascension liberates us from captivity to all lesser loyalties. It is wonderfully counter-cultural. Of course, we’ll try to love our country, though that’s not always easy. We’ll try to respect its leaders, though that can be a challenge too. We may salute our flags. We may even hang those flags in some of our churches. But always, front and above all for the church, stands the cross.

Christ lives – and reigns! In our confused and confusing world.

The ecumenical movement has produced many conferences. But none has had greater influence on its participants than the World Conference of Christian Youth that took place in July-August 1939. Mark well the date.

The lights were going out once again all over Europe. Of the 1500 young people who had gathered in Amsterdam, many would be caught up in the tragedy about to engulf their countries.

And what was the theme of their gathering? It was "*Christus Victor*" – Christ the Victor.

A few weeks after the conference ended, the Second World War began. Many of those young men and women were to find themselves in armies, in prisoner-of-war camps, in resistance movements.

Many were inspired to become leaders in movements for Christian unity, peace and social justice. One, Willem Visser 't Hooft, would serve as founding general secretary of the World Council of Churches. Another, Madelaine Barot, from France, would risk her life getting Jews to safety across the Swiss border -- I guess we'd now call her a people-smuggler.

Christ the Victor. The theme continued reverberating for those young people, wherever they were, whatever the circumstances in which they found themselves.

As their conference message had said: "*The nations and peoples of the world are drifting apart. The Churches are coming together.... In war, conflict and persecution we must strengthen one another and preserve our Christian unity unbroken*".

He is our living Lord. Even for the church. Especially for the church.

Fifty-nine years ago, in a small Congregational church in Melbourne, I was ordained. The 27<sup>th</sup> of May 1965 was, fortuitously, Ascension Day. I will always be grateful for that coincidence of dates. The sovereignty of Christ is an important message for a new minister to have drummed into his or her head and heart. Through these 59 years, dealing with the church in many places and forms, I've often recalled the Ascension theme of that ordination.

Yes, we know the church's fragility, for it is our fragility. We know its errors, its compromises, its divisions. They are our errors, compromises, divisions. We know its sin. It is our sin.

But we also know the church does not rest on our weak shoulders. It does not depend on clergy or church councils, on theologians or bureaucrats, on your spiritual fervour or mine.

It is carried on shoulders much stronger than ours. Guided by one far more trustworthy. Sustained by a strength far greater. Its future rests ultimately with Christ, not us.

Christ, risen and ascended, our living Lord.

Of the world.

Of the church.

Now, and forever.