

Hearts to Heaven" A sermon based on Luke 24:44, John 17:20-26 and Acts 1:1-11 preached on Ascension Sunday, May 17, 2026 by the Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan.

We know from John's Gospel that the resurrected Jesus, who appeared in some kind of eventually recognizable bodily form, usually after naming names or breaking bread, plans to ascend into the realm of God soon. On Easter morning, when Mary Magdalene finally recognizes him as Jesus and not the gardener, he asks her not to try to hold on to him because he has not yet ascended to the Father" and then asks her to go to the disciples and to tell them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." (John 20:17) From this, we gain a picture of a process" of ascension beginning with the Resurrection, for Jesus says "I have not yet ascended," but "I am ascending."

This process of Jesus' ascension is a journey. Traditionally it is a forty-day journey which ends ten days before Pentecost. The forty days, as we know, is the biblical formula for a journey of significance: Jesus' days in the wilderness; Noah's voyage; forty years in the desert for the people of Israel; Davids reign was forty years, and so on. The resurrected Jesus takes forty significant days "between earth and heaven," so to speak, to visit with those who needed to see, hear, and break bread with him. He needed to appear to those who needed to hear from his heart that he planned to keep his promises. These heart promises are the ones we hear about in all of our lessons this morning. The promise of being "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49) by being "baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now," (Acts 15) and finally the promise to be with Jesus eventually "where I am" he says, to see his glory (John 17:24).

We could call this journey that Jesus is taking from resurrection to ascension a "journey by heart." When we say that we know something "by heart" we mean that we have memorized it so completely that it has become part of our very being.

Rita Nakashima Brock, retired professor and theologian, writes in her book entitled Journeys by Heart in the Chapter "The Character of Being Human," the following explanation of this:

Because the very existence of heart is basic to the structure of human life itself and is the basis of our being broken in relationships, we require connections if we are to acknowledge our own broken heart and be healed....Heart is our original grace. In exploring the depths of heart we find incarnate in ourselves the divine reality of connection, of love....Finding our heart requires a loving presence who helps us search, who is not afraid of the painfulness of the search, ..this loving presence and healing memory carry the profoundest meanings of forgiveness and remembrance. (p. 16-17)

I maintain that what Prof. Brock is talking about here this “loving presence and healing memory” is the power of the ascended Jesus. It is the power of the ascended Jesus which permeates our lives of faith, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, which gives strength beyond ourselves for healing ourselves and others, and which very simply gives us hope. It is the ascended Jesus that appears as a blinding light to Saul and miraculously changes him from a persecutor of the followers of Christ’s way into the Apostle Paul, founder of so many first Century mission churches. It is the ascended Jesus, no longer visible in fleshly form, whose divine heart is the one with which we seek to connect.

One of my favorite hymns is “Alleluia, Alleluia! Hearts to Heaven” (134 in UCC, 1974 hymnal and 289 as revised in our hymnal). To me the title itself speaks of our struggle to stay right with God, the ascended Christ, and the Holy Spirit. We are singing it today even though it is really an Easter morning hymn. The words speak of how we need to connect to the holy. In the third verse Christopher Wordsworth, a distinguished clergyman and nephew of the more famous English poet William Wordsworth, originally wrote these words:

Christ is risen, we are risen! Shed upon us heavenly grace, Rain and dew and gleams of glory from the brightness of Thy face; That we, with our

hearts in heaven, here on earth may fruitful be, And by angel hands be gathered, and be ever, Lord, with Thee.

They have been “revised” in our hymnal by Jubilate Hymns, but the original words, as stated above, are quite beautiful. To connect with the power of the risen and ascended Jesus we need to “lift our hearts to heaven.” In order to find “the heavenly grace,” as Wordsworth calls it, to do God’s will here on earth through Christ we must lift our hearts to heaven. Of his hymn writing Wordsworth once stated, “It is the first duty of a hymn to teach sound doctrine and thence to save souls.”

In keeping with that philosophy, Christopher Wordsworth, whose clerical career culminated in being named the Anglican bishop of Lincoln in 1868, wrote many hymns. It is interesting that the 1931 brown Pilgrim Hymnal contained four of his hymns, whereas our current hymnal only contains two. I think I know why that is. All the rest of them are very long and true hymnologists do not allow for leaving out any verses, But, to hear what this hymn writing theologian had to say about the ascended Jesus, we should look at Christopher Wordsworth’s hymn on the subject. In 1862 he wrote a hymn entitled “See, the Conqueror Mounts in Triumph” on the theme of the Ascension. The hymn is eleven verses long, and would be ponderous to sing, but the ninth verse is brilliant in its simplicity:

Raise us up from earth to Heaven, give us wings of faith and love, Gales of holy aspirations wafting us to realms above; That, with hearts and minds uplifted, we with Christ our Lord may dwell, Where He sits enthroned in glory in His heavenly citadel.

It is with "wings of faith and love" that we are to find the ascended Jesus, no longer available to us in flesh and blood, or even in a body changed by resurrection. It is through the mystery of the power of the Holy Spirit that we find our own power to be and do.

One way that we find that power to be uplifted by the Holy Spirit is to sing. Another is to read poetry. I still remember, about the time my mother was dying of cancer, seeing an episode of the television show The Waltons which spoke to me then, and still speaks to me in my memory, of how we can reach out to Christ and have our hearts uplifted. how we can feel our hearts turning to heaven and gain our “wings of faith and love,” as Christopher Wordsworth’s hymn bids us do.

In the episode, John Boy, who as you remember aspired to being a writer, wanted to give his mother a gift. His mother, Olivia, had recently experienced the miscarriage of a baby that, after having so many children, she may not have really wanted. The air was full of difficulty and tension and guilt. It was his mother’s birthday, if I remember correctly. As a gift, and as a way to reach her in her sadness and grief, he asked Olivia to join him under the tree in the front yard, where he proceeded to share with her the poem “The Windhover” by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Gerard Manley Hopkins, like his fellow countryman Christopher Wordsworth, was also a cleric who, the year that Wordsworth became bishop of Lincoln, joined the Jesuit novitiate (he was ordained in 1877). When he became a Jesuit, Hopkins destroyed all the poetry he had previously written, but the sinking of a German ship carrying five Franciscan nuns who were exiles from Germany in 1875 inspired him to begin writing again. He wrote his best poetry then. One of those is the poem John Boy read to his mother, with all of its obvious symbols of the ascended Christ:

***The Windhover** By Gerard Manley Hopkins

To Christ our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
 dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding

High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
 In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
 As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
 Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
 Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
 Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
 Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
 Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
 Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

When John Boy finished his reading, his mother was visibly moved and her spirits were lifted up, as was I. Whether you are able to see the Christological implications here in these verses, or even understand all the words, one cannot help but be swept up by their cadence and beauty. When the poet remarks:

“My heart in hiding Stirred for a bird, the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!”

I see in my heart that bird as Jesus ascending, Jesus standing near in a vision with Stephen as he is being martyred (Acts 7), Jesus through the Holy Spirit urging Philip on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza to teach the gospel to and then baptize the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), Jesus On the Road to Damascus (Acts 9), and finally Jesus here in this sanctuary as we worship, pray and sing!

When you feel your heart lifting to heaven you are sensing the presence of the ascended Jesus. Oxford Don and author, C.S. Lewis, former atheist turned

Christian, called these moments “being surprised by joy” and further said that they were transforming for him. And so, they were and so they are! Amen.

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**Windhover: A small European falcon, the kestrel, noted for its habit of hovering in the air against the wind. 1 minion : favorite. 2 dauphin : prince, eldest son and heir of the king. 4 rung . . . rein : from horsemanship: the horse circling at the end of a long rein, about its trainer. 3d ed, p. 228. wimpling : rippling. 6 bowbend; wide turn. 8 achievesment. Io Buckle: engage, grapple (. II told : counted. chevalier: knight; Christ. Cf. minion, dauphin, ll. 1, 2. 12 plodding. sillion : furrow. 14 gall: wound. gash . . . vermilion : the wound exposes the glowing red blood.*