

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
1 June 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Ascension Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Rising to the Challenge with Blessing”

Part of the Annual theme, *Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*
Touchstone words in Easter Season: *BLESS and CHALLENGE*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Luke 24:44-53

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

The Ascension is a wacky and wondrous story, isn't it? Much has been made of Jesus being “carried up to heaven” by many a theologian.

Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, once famously and sarcastically asked his congregation, “*Now do you suppose that Jesus went up past the moon and perhaps took a right at Mars?*”¹

Playing off this, Franciscan priest Father Richard Rohr states more bluntly, “*We shouldn't believe in a Rocketship Jesus. The ascension is not a ‘Beam me up Scotty’ moment.*”²

Which is to say, the Ascension is not meant to challenge our intellectual reason; it's meant to ignite our spiritual imagination.

This is a good week to be reminded about how priest and scholar John Dominic Crossan explains scriptural interpretation: “*It's not that the ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.*”³

As these stories were told and passed down and recorded centuries before the Enlightenment. Their capital T “Truth” was in the story itself, not in our “after the fact” historical fact-checking or scientific explanations.

Is it possible that Jesus' body physically rose up into the sky? Sure. All things are possible with God and I am not one to deny miracles. But when we set

¹ As quotes in a sermon by Rev. Salvatore Sapienza on June 2, 2022 (accessed on June 1, 2025 at <https://www.douglasucc.org/homilies/did-jesus-defy-the-law-of-gravity>).

² Ibid.

³ John Dominic Crossan quoted in several lectures, including, *Who Is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions About the Historical Jesus*.

aside trying to figure out the mechanics of the mystery, and read the Ascension story for its spiritual meaning as intended, it becomes clear that this is not a story about one man (Jesus) ascending up into the sky 2000 years ago, as much as it is a story about our own transformations and *our spiritual ascensions* as ones who follow in the Way of Jesus.

Because *where* does Luke say Jesus ascended to? Heaven. And where does *Jesus* say Heaven is?

Jesus says, “*The kingdom of heaven is within you,*” (Luke 17:21).⁴ Within you. Within me. Within us! THAT is where Jesus went. That's where he ascended to or was carried off to: *within* us! We'll talk more about this next week on Pentecost, but “God-with-us” (Emmanuel) living as Jesus (one person in one time and in one place) *had to leave* so that “God-within-us,” the Spirit could live and move and have its being within ALL of us, all people, everywhere. No longer bound by time, place, person, or location, but now unbounded

⁴ In fact, as one theologian explains, in the Gospel of Matthew, the “kingdom of heaven” as described by Jesus is actually NOT a place but “*a process, or a course of events, whereby God begins to govern, act, or manifest as divine presence in the [lives] and world of*

and everywhere within all people in all times in all places.

And as this Spirit comes to live within us we ascend in our spiritual understanding of what it means to love God and love others and *really* live that out. And as we rise, so too does our entire society and world ‘ascend’—finally and forever rising above all the hatred, ego, wars, and injustices of our day, and actually becoming (transforming into) the kin-dom of heaven here on earth. The time when all are Thriving in Goodness for Good and *FOR GOOD*. The second *FOR GOOD* referring to the kin-dom of heaven here on earth.

So how do we rise to this challenge to live as people Thriving in Goodness for Good and *FOR GOOD*?

Well, we begin where Jesus ends—with Blessing.

This kind of blessing is not light-hearted and carefree. It is born in challenge, as we see in the Ascension story.

[*humans*].” Schillebeeckx, Edward (1983) [1974]. *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. London: Fount Paperbacks. pp. 140–141.

The first challenge we see in today's text is the **Challenge of Goodbye**. Jesus physically leaves his disciples—forever.

Goodbyes are almost always challenging—whether you are saying goodbye to a loved one who is dying, giving your college bound child a hug before you send them off to their first semester, or ending a relationship with your partner that you know needs to end even as there are things you'll always love about them.

Goodbyes are challenging when we lose a pet who loved us unconditionally for years, when we downsize and move out of a house that has been the family 'hub' for decades, when we lose our chance at a dream due to circumstances beyond our control like illness, injury, or injustice.

Whether it's a goodbye of our choosing, one that happens upon us, or one that is chosen for us by another—we know the difficulty of saying goodbye, so we can empathize with the challenge in this moment for the disciples. They had upended their lives for Jesus, leaving their families and their professions for this huge 'unknown.' For three years they

had lived and traveled with Jesus, day in and day out, and then they watched him die violently on a cross, and then, in the midst of their grief they were whiplashed into hope and confusion, as Jesus rose and spent another 40 days with them—eating with them and breathing words of peace upon them, reminding them of God's love and their calling as witnesses to all that they have seen and experienced, the gifts of repentance and forgiveness for ALL nations, ALL people.

This Good News, as we now call it, was not Easy News for the disciples to understand and digest. So you can imagine that while every goodbye is a challenge, having to say goodbye to your teacher and mentor, when you still yet feel like you have sooo much to learn and understand about what you are supposed to be doing in the future...well, it's doubly difficult. It's a challenging goodbye that leaves questions unanswered. Mysteries not resolved.

In addition to the Challenge of Goodbye, there is also the **Challenge of Remaining Faithful in Fearful Times**. You see, Jesus tells his disciples "*to stay here in the city,*" (vs 48).

That is, they are to remain in Jerusalem. *Jerusalem!* Well, based on the disciples' most recent experience...what happens in Jerusalem? People are mocked, tortured, and crucified in Jerusalem. 40 days earlier they had experienced horrific events in this city. Jerusalem, to the disciples, was a city of terror and torture, a place where they huddled in locked rooms in fear. They were so fearful of being recognized as ones who were associated with Jesus. Fearful of being killed themselves.

Plus, Jerusalem was not their home. Most of the disciples were from around the Sea of Galilee—the more relaxed resort villages by the lake—and hadn't seen their families in three years. I imagine Being Faithful in these Fearful Times by staying put in the city of Jerusalem was not their first choice. It makes me think of the song from English punk rock band *The Clash* “Should I Stay or Should I Go?”

*Should I stay, or should I go
now?
Should I stay, or should I go
now?
If I go, there will be trouble*

*And if I stay, it will be double...
So come on and let me know...
Should I stay, or should I go⁵*

If *you* were the disciples, what would you do? Probably go?! But, *they* stay. They Remain Faithful in Fearful Times.

Just as the disciples were afraid that Roman soldiers might march into their Temple and get them, so too are millions of people in our day fearful that ICE will march into their schools and workplaces and take them. So yes, we can imagine and resonate with the disciples' challenge to remain faithful in Fearful & Uncertain Times.

It is hard to remain faithful to the God you know to be faithful even as worries, anxieties, wars, and injustices are increasing faster than we can keep up with. It is hard to remain faithful—and hopeful for that matter—when we are being told things we didn't think were possible, when we are reading things in the news we can't comprehend, and when we're experiencing the real life effects of decisions that will affect lives forever. It's a challenge to Remain Faithful in Fearful Times EVEN if that means simply “not checking

⁵ Lyrics accessed on <https://genius.com/The-clash-should-i-stay-or-should-i-go-lyrics>.

out” or not “numbing out” but keeping ourselves informed and vocal about injustice but not being overwhelmed by it.

And this leads us to the third challenge in this text, the

Challenge of Choosing Joy when we don’t feel Joyful.

After they are blessed by Jesus, the disciples do return to Jerusalem, but they return not with fear as we would expect, but “with joy!” They return with joy; they worship Jesus.

This was not a happy clappy joy. This was joy in the midst of fear, joy when they didn’t feel joyful, joy in the midst of risking their lives by going to the Temple to worship.

Choosing joy does not mean ignoring sorrow or caving to threat. Choosing joy does not mean fear is eradicated.

Choosing joy does not mean that “all is good,” it simply means that we know we are created to Thrive in Goodness, and in the absence of Joy, we cannot thrive.

As Abolitionist and activist for civil rights and women’s rights, and as One who had every reason to focus on struggle

instead of joy—Sojourner Truth—said, “*Life is a hard battle anyway. If we laugh and sing a little as we fight the good fight of freedom, it makes it all go easier.*”⁶

Author & Founder of *The Happiness Project*, Gretchen Reuben, studies happiness for a living. How lovely, right? Well, this week I heard her respond to a timely question on this topic in a podcast: “Isn’t it morally inappropriate for me to seek be happier or more joyful in a world so full of injustice and suffering? Isn’t that wrong? And if I’m trying to be happier in my own life, does that mean that I’m smug or complacent or that I’m turning my back on the problems of the world?”

Reuben responds saying, “Research shows, and you’ve probably seen this in the people around you, that happier people are actually more interested in the problems of the world. And they’re more interested in the problems of the people around them. They’re more likely to volunteer. They’re more likely to vote. They’re more likely to donate their time or their money. They’re more likely to help out if someone needs a

⁶ As quoted in Cole Arthur Riley’s book, *Black Liturgies*.

hand. They have healthier habits. Because when we're unhappy, we tend to become isolated and defensive and preoccupied with our own problems...But when we're more joy-filled, we're able to turn outward and to think about the problems of the world. So you don't have to choose between serving yourself and serving the world because they actually go together. And so if you are overwhelmed [with the pain and the hurt in the world right now and a lot of people are] it is not selfish to think, okay, well, how can I [bring more joy] to my life? This becomes even more important when you are facing something really huge. Find joy."⁷

It's not easy for the disciples to go directly to the Temple, a place where they would be easily recognized by those in power, a place where their lives would be at risk. But they do. They choose Joy. In the midst of their fear, they choose to cultivate joy. They choose to show up and worship. They choose praise. They choose community.

And so have you! Look at you, showing up to worship today! I know enough of your stories to know that many of you are not feeling joyful right now in this season of life. Perhaps you are here because you know that when you cannot cultivate or choose joy on your own, you show up to community to see if you can catch a bit of it from others who are on the same journey. To receive the blessing or hope of joy from them. To hear that joy is possible. To be reminded. Even perhaps, to celebrate in someone else's joy.

And this leads us to Blessing, and the three blessings in this text that help us respond to these challenges.

First, we can be **Blessed by our Memories & Past Experiences.**

Before Jesus sent the disciples off to the challenging, fear-filled city of Jerusalem, he brought them to Bethany. Why Bethany?

Bethany was a place of deep blessing in their shared ministry. Bethany is the place Jesus withdrew to to rest and rejuvenate, and Bethany is the town with the home of Mary,

⁷ Jen Hatmaker Podcast, *For the Love*, Episode 59: Series 64: "Secrets of Adulthood: Gretchen Rubin on Living a Happier, Simpler Life," (28 May 2025),

accessed on June 1, 2025 at <https://jenhatmaker.com/podcasts/series-64/gretchen-rubin/>.

Martha, and Lazarus—Jesus’ close friends. Bethany is the place where we learn Jesus took solace and delight in the company of close friends. Bethany is also the site of the raising of Lazarus and two accounts of Jesus’ receiving the gift of a woman’s anointing. Bethany, therefore, is a place of healing, of restoration of life, of hospitality, and of friendship.”⁸

As artist Jan Richardson notes, “For Jesus’ companions who witness his ascension, Bethany conjures memories that Jesus [wants] them to draw upon as they begin to live without him....gifts of hospitality, friendship, [and renewal]...The fact that Jesus chooses Bethany as his place of departure suggests that he intends for them to remember that these gifts will remain with them as well.”⁹

As we face the challenges of living in these times, might we take some time to remember—and return to—the places that have been a blessing to us, the people who have blessed us, the experiences that have filled us with blessing. If you can physically go to those places,

make an effort to do that. Or spend time writing about them or sketching them or sharing about them with a friend over coffee. If a person who has blessed you is still living, send them a text, write them a letter, call them. Connect. If they are no longer with us, visit a place that reminds you of them, or a pull out a picture or object that they are connected to. Reflect, remember, give thanks. Journal about the experiences that have led you to this place...no matter how hard the moment of “NOW” is...you have made it this far because of blessings in your past you will need that energy and memory to help carry you into your future.

Jesus knew Jerusalem would be challenging. So he took the disciples first to Bethany—a place of healing, friendship, and thriving—so that they could remember the best things about their shared ministry together before he left them.

And then, after being Blessed by their Memories & Past Experience in Bethany, the disciples are **Blessed by Jesus** right then and there in the Present moment.

⁸ Jan Richardson, “Ascension/Easter 7: A Blessing at Bethany,” *The Painted Prayerbook* (30 April 2008), accessed on June 1, 2025 at

<https://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/04/30/ascension-a-blessing-at-bethany/>.

⁹ Richardson, *ibid.*

As Jesus leaves his disciples, he doesn't recap every parable and teaching he's ever taught them, or say, "*make sure you remember this rule or that rule.*" Jesus last act on this earth is *blessing*. He says, "*You've got this.*" We might imagine ourselves running a relay, and this moment of blessing is the moment that Jesus officially hands the baton to his disciples and to us and says, "*Carry on; finish the race. I've brought you this far, and my Spirit will carry you the rest of the way.*"

My favorite part of this image of being Blessed by Jesus is that the text says, "*while he was blessing them, he withdrew from them.*" The blessing wasn't finished! The disciples are hanging mid-sentence with Jesus in his blessing. It's like they are caught, and we are caught—for all eternity—in this all-encompassing, never ending, continual blessing. It's caught forever in our spiritual imaginations. A moment frozen in time. Never finished.

It reminds me of the iconic image of Michael Jordan hanging in mid-air to dunk a basket. He has left the ground but hasn't yet dunked the ball,

and the image preserved is not one of dunking but the one of hanging in mid-air because that's the magic moment right? The moment before the moment? The moment of unending possibility that we marvel at. Likewise, we are mid-air with Jesus in the moment of greatest anticipation of hope. He has left the ground, the hard part is over, and the best part is yet to come...the blessing is not yet complete...but for as long as we are all in mid-air, as long as we are mid-life, working toward building the kin-dom of heaven—Jesus' blessing is all around us, just 'hovering'...

So perhaps another way to imagine this blessing is like the cloud of dust that follows Charles Shulz's Pig Pen character in the Peanuts cartoon. We cannot escape the blessing of Jesus. Or maybe this all-surrounding blessing is what Irish poet and priest John O'Donohue meant when he wrote, "*A blessing is a circle of light drawn around a person to protect, heal, and strengthen.*"¹⁰

Because we are blessed by Jesus with his belief and encouragement in us and that

¹⁰ John O'Donohue, from his book, *To Bless the Space Between us*.

blessing is never ending, we can be a blessing to others. And that is the third gift of Blessing in this text. The truth that may sound cliché but is the deepest truth of all: **We are Blessed to be a Blessing...now and in the future.**

Because Jesus ascended mid-blessing, and because the point of his ascension was for his Spirit to now come and live in and through us, as we will see next week on Pentecost—we are now the hands and feet of Jesus blessing the world.

Jesus' disciples recognize that his leaving is part of his blessing, that he has freed them to live into their ongoing call. Because what do they do? They respond to Jesus' blessing by offering blessings of their own, in the temple and beyond. They respond to his blessing by becoming his body.¹¹

On Ascension, as the Church Fathers say, "Christ's body did not leave us; rather, he came to live within us, in a new body, a new form."¹²

This is the move from Emmanuel, *God with us* at Christmas—to Holy Spirit, *God*

within us—at Pentecost. And the Ascension is the doorway or threshold between the two.

Sixteenth century Spanish Carmelite nun and mystic Saint Teresa of Ávila wrote:

*“Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world...”*

**Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world:**

How will you look at people this week?

How will you make eye contact with the Venezuelans on the street wanting to wash your windshield at a red light? How will you look at the neighbor you walk by who's wearing whatever political hat or t-shirt that you despise? How will you see the stressed-out parent in the grocery store whose child is not behaving how you might prefer

¹¹ Richardson, *ibid.*

¹² Richardson, *ibid.*

them to? How will you look at *yourself* in the mirror each day?

Every time you see others through the eyes of Christ, you honor their dignity and belovedness—helping them feel seen in the fullness of who they are, in the fullness of who God created them to be.

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good:

How do you move your feet for Christ?

By walking in PRIDE parades alongside our queer siblings? By joining the national boycott and stopping your feet from entering Target, and other stores like it that have eliminated its DEI initiatives, policies, protections, and goals? By joining Ukrainians downtown to march for peace in their country? Or by standing alongside our South Sudanese friends as they grieve their country devolving into yet another civil war?

Every time you put your body somewhere, you are showing people by the movement of your feet what you stand for, and what you won't stand for.

Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.

Will your hands serve food and water to the hungry and thirsty? Will your hands reach out to hug someone who is hurting or alone? Will your hands dial your congress persons to advocate for policies that are life-giving for all? Will your hands knit blankets for those who need prayers? Will your hands write a note to thank someone? Will your hands build bridges instead of fences?

Every time you use your hands for Good in the world, you bring us just a bit more within arms reach of the fullness of the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

We live in a world of continual challenge, yet Jesus gives us the gift of continual blessing. It's our forever and lasting image of him: Blessing Us. And now as his Body we become the continual blessing for the world.

May we Rise to the Challenge of These Times with Blessing. For it is in and through Blessing that we will Thrive in Goodness, creating Good in the world until the day when continual Blessing is our reality *FOR GOOD*, that is, forever.

Amen.