**Coronado Community Church**

“Jesus is Flying”

Acts 1: 1-11

A sermon by Pastor Eric Smith

May 29, 2022

Some of you know my sister, Kelly. She lives in New Zealand. She is married to Neal, who is a Kiwi. Neal is an engineer specializing in water projects. He spent many years working for Team New Zealand.

They met when the America’s Cup Race took place in San Diego in 1988. Team New Zealand headquarters was here in Coronado.

A few years later they married and have lived in New Zealand ever since. Neal continued to work with the America’s Cup contenders Team New Zealand and Oracle.

In between America’s Cup campaigns, Neal worked on projects around the world. A few years ago the family spent 6 months in Sweden. The language was a bit of a barrier, but with broken English, and broken Swedish, and lots of hand gestures they all did fine.

One day, at this time of the year, Neal was on his way out of the door and said to the others he would *see them tomorrow.* They said… *no… tomorrow is a holiday.* That was unexpected.

Neal asked, *what’s the holiday?*

Unsure of the translation, the Swedish engineers huddled together to discuss the English name of the holiday arriving the following day. Neal waited patiently. Finally, after a few moments of hugger-mugger… the spokesman of the Swedish engineers announced the name of the holiday. He said, *Jesus is Flying.*

The holiday is *Ascension Day*, when the church celebrates Jesus being taken up from the Mount of Olives to be with God in heaven. While not-too-big a deal in this country, it is a national holiday in Sweden and other European countries.

Jesus is flying.

Ascension Day traces back to 68 AD. It takes place on the 40th day after Easter. Today is the Sunday celebration of Ascension Day.

You heard our scripture passage…

*as the disciples were watching,*

*he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*

I look at this story and ask… *who told this story? And why?*

Jesus didn’t tell this story. He was outta’ there. His disciples told the story. But they didn’t tell the one we’re looking at today. The one who wrote this down was Luke – and he wasn’t a disciple. Luke wrote the Book of Acts… and the Gospel of Luke, too. Every story we read in those two books, crafted by Luke, is (at least) second hand. He wrote stories he had heard. Mostly he heard them from disciples and other followers. They helped him tell the bigger story of the incredible Jesus.

Luke was like that native American elder who prefaced an old story with these words…

*I don’t know if what I am about to tell you happened exactly like this,*

*but,*

*I know that what I am telling you is true…*

These stories, including our passage today, express deeper meaning than the exact details that have been passed to us.

Think, with me, about first century storytelling.

There were no recording devices. No phones, no videos, no pictures, (not even black and white). Nothing. The only recordings were writings which was done laboriously by hand with a quill and pot of ink. There was no paper as we know it… only parchment made from animal skin – very expensive. There were few people who could read anything that was written – and even fewer who could actually write.

By our standards, precise recollections of events simply did not exist. However… storytellers had a high calling… they told the truth.

Have you ever gone fishing? Have you ever listened to a fisherman tell you about a big fish he caught? *Well how big was it?*

The first time the story is told (it was *this* big) which was probably pretty close to that size. Certainly not smaller. But as time goes on, and the story is told again and again that fish gets bigger. You know what I’m talking about? It’s a big fish story.

The disciples… were fishermen.

Follow me, Jesus said, and I’ll make you fishers of men! Jesus (no disrespect intended) … Jesus was a really big fish… and they had his truth to tell.

Jesus was lifted up. Does that mean he blasted off to heaven like he was wearing an invisible jet pack? I wasn’t there… but probably not. Jesus was lifted up in countless ways by countless people and the truth of that is conveyed in this story of ascension.

So how does the ascension of Jesus speak to us today? How is Jesus lifted up in the midst of our struggling with the events of the past week?

We are far enough away from Uvalde Texas that we heard the news, feel badly for those folks, and can pretty much move on to backyard bar-b-ques on Memorial Day.

But what if the news read like this…

*Nineteen children and two adults were killed in a shooting at Central Elementary School in Coronado, California on Tuesday, making the massacre the deadliest school shooting in California history.*

*The 19 students included fashionistas and artists, basketball and softball players, dancers and TikTok makers. The two educators were celebrated veteran teachers who together had taught Coronado’s children for four decades.*

*One boy brewed his grandparents a pot of coffee every morning. One girl wanted to be a marine biologist. One teacher had been married for 24 years to her high school sweetheart.*

*As summer vacation approached, their lives were abruptly cut short by a gunman at Central Elementary School in the upscale beach town of Coronado.*

*“My heart is broken today,” said Coronado Unified School District Superintendent Karl Mueller … while holding back tears during a press conference.*

*Coronado’s chief of police, Chuck Kaye, said the shooter is believed to have acted alone,*

*“What happened in Coronado is a horrific tragedy.”*

How can we celebrate Jesus’ ascension as we struggle with the events of this past week?

I want to remind you of a few of his values to help us think of how Jesus might respond were he speaking to us in person today…

You and I live in the midst of a national polarized struggle for power. It’s ugly, it’s nasty. The tragedy of Uvalde is another opportunity for the political factions of our country to blame each other for what was done, or not done, that might have affected this tragedy.

In the 1st century Jesus lived with every bit as much cultural tension as we do… in fact, more. A foreign nation occupied his homeland. The religious leaders of his faith – Pharisees and Sadducees - were diametrically opposed to each other. People argued, they fought, assassinations were commonplace, and the government dealt with public dissent by crucifying people. It makes our own challenges look … not quite so formidable.

As far as we know, Jesus didn’t line up with one side or the other. He lived above it. He stayed above it. He didn’t make political commentary, even when smart people tried to goad him into it.

Do you remember that story of **the temple tax?**

There were three regular taxes that the Roman government required of Jews – and they hated the taxes and the Romans.

One day some Pharisees asked Jesus

***…is it right to pay the tax to Caesar, or not?***

If he said that it was unlawful to pay the tax, he was in trouble.

If he said that it was lawful to pay the tax, he was in trouble.

So either way that Jesus answered the question - yes or no – he would be in trouble.

The thing to keep in mind about those Pharisees and Sadducees is that they represented real people who were doing the best that they knew how in trying to live purposeful and good lives. They were basically decent, god-fearing human beings.

How did Jesus answer them? From elevation. Up here.

… *show me the coin used for paying taxes… whose picture is on it… (Caesar’s) give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.*

This Jesus, who we look up to, didn’t side with left or right. He sided with God and asked,

What is God’s way through this?

What are the values and purposes of God that pertain to this moment?

How do I express them?

Jesus didn’t carry a weapon. He told his disciples not to carry weapons. He didn’t make pronouncements about weapons – he spoke about peace in your life.

He said blessed are the peacemakers. (Matthew 5)

He said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” (John 14)

The followers of Jesus are not compelled to line up with one side or another. We follow him… we elevate.

Isn’t it difficult to do that? Yes. It’s more difficult than standing with one angry group hurling insults at another. It’s a challenge. Following Jesus is always a challenge

Phillips Brooks, wrote, one of Jesus’ storytellers from the past said this…

Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger people.

Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks.

Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle.

Every day you shall wonder at yourself,

at the richness of life which has come to you …

by the grace of God.

Here is the message of Ascension Day – Jesus is still flying … and you can fly, too. Keep watching him and you’ll see what to do and how to do it.

Jesus my shepherd, my brother, my friend; my prophet, my priest, my king;

My Lord, my life, my way, my end… Accept the praise we bring.