

St James United Church



Message for May 17, 2026

Ascension Sunday

“From Grief to Hope” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Acts 1:1-11; John 17:1-11; Excerpt from Bede Griffiths, *Universal Wisdom*

For the last seven Sundays we have been reflecting on Jesus’ resurrection and its impact in our lives personally and collectively. We now mark Ascension Sunday, reflecting on Jesus’ return to God. We know what comes next, the pouring out of the Spirit on the disciples, giving them renewed hope as they felt empowered to share the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. In all this we have the advantage of knowing the whole story. That is a gift to us as a faith community.

The disciples weren’t as lucky. The account we heard from Acts is in its opening verses when Jesus, who had been appearing to them for forty days, and so they must have felt like this was going to be the new normal, was taken from their sight, not to return. That must have come as such a shock, setting them back into deep grief, as if he hadn’t been raised at all. That’s what I hear as the angel asks why they’re looking up to heaven. But how could they not? All they had were the memories of what they’d shared with Jesus. They only had what had been and felt unsure of what to do next, even though he’d told them the Spirit would be with them.

Now despite what I said about knowing the next part of the story, I feel like we can relate to this both as a congregation and a wider church. Yes, we can draw on our experiences of the Risen Christ, draw too not just on the promise of Pentecost but on the Spirit’s animating power over two thousand years, but we are human and in this moment of our history, many of us feel like the disciples, focused on where we’ve been, unsure of what comes next. That’s what I have been hearing under the surface in our listening sessions with the Change@ team, been hearing too in the comments made to Stephanie, and I’m sure to each other, as you question how you can be asked to imagine St. James in twenty-five years when you can’t even think past five. What I hear is grief. You are grieving friends, grieving the presence of children, including adult children who don’t come to church anymore, grieving the full sanctuaries of past decades and with it the programs and events that went with being a large church. And it’s not just the St. James of the past we are grieving, but other congregations too, and to be honest the United Church as a whole. We are past our heyday. Though we are still Canada’s largest Protestant denomination with over 2 million self-identifying as United in the last census, that doesn’t translate into Sunday attendance, or the ability to meet budgets, or have influence. We grieve all of that.

As I name that I want to assure you it’s ok. It’s important for us not to gloss over those feelings. And so even though it is still Easter, I am taking down these white banners. I want to affirm what you’re feeling. *White paraments taken down.* Let’s just be for a bit as we sit with the memories, lament the hurt, hold the sorrow that we carry in our hearts.

A time of silence is followed by this prayer:

Holy One, you who are the source of all compassion.
Receive our collective prayers of grief, hear the lament of our hearts.
We carry with us the memories of former days,
of loved ones no longer with us,
of ways of being together as church that are no longer possible.
We ache for what was. Walk with us in our sadness,
that we may hold it with honesty,
but not so tightly that we close ourselves
to the church that is present right now,
or hold back the church that you are leading us into.
Be with us in this time. Amen.

I wonder if we need to do more of that. As I said, we shouldn't gloss over our feelings.

But we also need to be cautious not to grieve forever. I'm sure you noted the end of my prayer and the call not to hold grief tightly. Anyone who has grieved a loved one knows the risk of getting stuck. Jesus knew that too, hence the prayer concluding his farewell speech as he asked God to be with his disciples, to protect and hold them in love, to help them stay together, to see each other. We can stop seeing each other when we grieve, our sorrow making it hard to see those still with us, in our context, to see the sixty plus new and returning people worshipping here over the last few years, with a good number of younger adults, blocking too our ability to see our neighbours, to listen to them and respond to their needs. The same is true denominationally, the past so much of our focus, and so we can tend to overlook the new congregations being formed, ignore reports of those that are growing, or are trying new things. Grief held too tightly can hold us back from the future, even just from living.

And we are still living. Jesus promised his disciples that the Spirit would come so they would be his witnesses to the end of the earth. That promise holds true. God isn't finished with us yet. I truly believe that, God, in love, inviting us to look at new possibilities, to take risks, to be ok with failing because that is how we learn, to become whatever it is that God has in mind for us, for all of us, and not just us but all of our neighbours, and whoever else the Spirit is inviting us to connect with. So let's put up our red banner in honour of what is coming. It is important to grieve. But also to hope. *Red paraments are put up.*

Then the following prayer is offered:

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in us your love.
Bind us together in hope for what you are doing in our midst.
We do not know where you are leading but that is as it should be.
Help us be open to your guiding, ready to try new things,
open to a church that may not look like it is right now,
but one still shaped by your wisdom, still embodying your way of love. Amen.