

February 19 Adult Spiritual Growth Class Synopsis

Let There Be Light: A Study of FPC Stained-Glass Windows – Ascension of Christ

First Presbyterian Church has been blessed with parishioner memorial gifts of 15 beautiful stained-glass windows over the years, as summarized in the wonderful guide put together by Virginia Wiley in 1990, as part of the 175 year anniversary celebration of the church. The window of focus is the Ascension of Christ, located in the first window from the altar on the right side of the sanctuary and framed in the upper medallion.

The window shows the Ascension of Christ with Jesus ascending in a shroud of glory to heaven, being very similar to that shown in the Resurrection window. Only His lower legs are shown with the foot wounds of His crucifixion visible. At the base of His shroud is what appears to be a pool of water, possibly symbolizing the waters of baptism in Romans 6:4, out of which we rise and walk in newness of life. The water may also be symbolic of the “water of life” spoken in *Revelation 22:1: Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city.*

We see six apostles, in addition to two women, likely Mary and Mary of Cleophas, looking upwards with praise. The upwards-looking depiction of the group is in accord with the Eastern liturgy on the Feast of the Ascension: “Come, let us rise and turn our eyes and thoughts high.” All present are shown with a nimbus, representing their sainthood and sacrificial commitment to Christ. The robes and tunics worn are of different colors with blue symbolizing hope; red signifying the blood of Christ, suffering and sacrifice; green embodying faith, immortality, life and rebirth; violet denoting love, truth, passion and suffering; gold representing divinity, power and glory; and brown symbolizing humility and renunciation of worldly things. Between the disciples is a bed of garden greenery upon which are the footprints of Jesus, showing His glory in the place where He stood as He arose. These footprints may symbolize His presence that remains with us through the Holy Spirit. The garden greenery may symbolize the restored Eden that is to come, which is spoken of in Revelation 22:1-5. Also shown in the midst of the greenery is rock that possibly symbolizes Jesus as in Psalm 188:22: *The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*

The upper medallion is filled with many other symbolic features as with previous windows: golden oak leaves representing God’s unending and sufficient strength; garlands of green laurel leaves symbolizing God’s eternal Word and triumph over sin through salvation in and through Christ Jesus; fern leaves that signify the humility of Jesus; a framed mandala, which symbolizes the everlasting life that God has given us in Christ Jesus through His birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. On top of the mandala rests an angel, robed in red on a half shell, who is God’s messenger of the Good News of God’s sacrificial love, saving grace and presence throughout our life’s faith journey.

The Ascension of Jesus is told in Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:50-5 and Mark 16:19-20. The great evidence of Jesus’ resurrection was that He showed Himself alive to His apostles. For 40 days, Jesus frequently appeared, walking and talking with them. He ate and drank with them and showed them again and again the marks of the wounds in his hands, feet, and side, which to many was the assuring proof. Out of great compassion, He brought them out of their sorrow for His departure.

In John 20:23, Jesus was not taken up till after he had given them their charge, and so finished His earthly work. *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and*

said, *“Receive the Holy Spirit.* Mark's and Luke's gospel conclude with the Lord's being received up into heaven.

Matthew Burden in Christianity Today comments that Scripture speaks of Jesus' Ascension as a necessary part of God's plan, which stands on equal footing with the Crucifixion and Resurrection in the earliest declarations of the Gospel. *Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets (Acts 3:21). God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins (Acts 5:31).*

Burden writes that the Ascension is not some strange vanishing act Jesus does at the end but the capstone of everything He has done in His passion. The Ascension is the triumphal act that crowns both the royal and priestly ministries of the Messiah in which David's heir ascends to reign and the Great High Priest completes the presentation of the atoning sacrifice.

Burden states that the Ascension appears to be an exact fulfillment of the prophetic vision of Daniel 7:13–14. In that vision, the Son of Man, surrounded with clouds, approaches the throne of the Ancient of Days and is given the dominion of an everlasting kingdom. The prophecy does not show the Messiah's rule beginning with an earthly reign, but with a heavenly one. Having defeated the powers of sin, Satan, and death, Jesus now makes His ascent to the throne. Jesus approaches the Ancient of Days and is crowned with splendor and honor. And although we still await His return, along with the full and final manifestation of His reign, that reign has already begun. He is on the throne, seated at the right hand of the Father with the signs expected of the messianic age being fulfilled before our eyes: the Spirit has been poured out and the nations have begun to turn their hearts to the worship of Israel's God.

Burden writes that a compelling array of biblical images connects Jesus' Ascension with the priestly work of the Messiah. Early Christians considered Jesus' death on the cross to be a sacrifice of atonement (*Romans 3:25*), an act whereby our sins are fully and finally forgiven. From the context of Israel's annual ritual of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, the penitent sinner needed a further step in the ritual of atonement: a sacrifice to be slain and a high priest to bear the sacrificial blood into the presence of God. The high priest was to take the blood of the sacrifice and ascend the steps of the temple—to enter into the sanctuary of the Lord surrounded by billowing clouds of incense. The high priest would step up into that cloud, vanishing from the sight of those in the temple courts, and then proceed into the Holy of Holies. There, in the presence of God, the high priest would present the blood of the sacrifice, completing the ritual of atonement and interceding for the people. Then he would emerge, coming back down through the cloud of incense in the same way the crowds had seen him leave, bearing the assurance of salvation back to the people of God.

If Jesus was the Great High Priest presenting a sacrifice in the heavenly tabernacle, He would have to ascend to perform that very function. The Day of Atonement ritual was not a matter of just going up into the temple and God's presence, but also coming back again. The present age of Jesus' absence, then, is the period of His active priestly service, as He fully empathizes with our weaknesses and continues to intercede for us in the presence of God the Father as written in *Hebrews 9:24-28*:

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just

as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

Burden writes that the Ascension is no mere footnote to the Gospel narratives; it is not an awkward absence to be explained away. It is nothing less than the climax of the Messiah's passion—and the setup for the finale of His great drama of redemption. The theological implication here is that the Ascension was the next necessary step in the ritual after the Cross. This does not imply any insufficiency in what Jesus did in his saving work on the Cross—only that this completed sacrifice was always intended to be followed by another step in the process, which was bearing his sacrifice into the true Holy of Holies.

We can find peace in knowing that the Ascension marks the beginning of the time when Jesus is preparing a place for His followers as He shares in *John 14:2-3*:

"In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

We can rejoice in knowing that our Lord will indeed return for us through *Revelation 2:20*:

*He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*

A song to reflect and pray on:

[\(67\) "I Will Rise" by Chris Tomlin \(with lyrics\) - YouTube](#)

Looking ahead – Sunday February 26

First window from altar on right side (Lower Medallion) – Beginnings of Presbyterian Education