***To Wait with Joy – A Reflection on the Ascension*** Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53 Dunedin Methodist Parish

Stories from the Gospels, particularly relating to the life of Jesus, have generated some of the very finest European art. As is always the way though, some stories have been more inspiring than others; the Nativity, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection have proved to be rich sources of inspiration. The Ascension not so much.

Oh there are paintings of Jesus floating ethereally upwards in what looks like a nightie rather as if, for him and for him alone, gravity has lost its pull. Or, there was the ceiling of the Chapel of the Ascension at the Anglican Shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Walsingham, England, which has a gloriously *kitsch* moulding of a ring of clouds with the pierced feet of Jesus ascending into heaven protruding downwards almost as if you could grab them and hitch a ride. Whatever reaction religious art is meant to generate, I’m sure me laughing out loud wasn’t it.

The Ascension narrative is one we can and do ignore. While in the Roman Catholic and Anglican calendars it was celebrated last Thursday, if this year with few if any opportunities to gather in worship. In our church it is Sundayized (sic), moved to this last Sunday of the season of Easter, and even then is an optional celebration. You might faithfully attend Methodist worship over a life time and never hear the Ascension reflected on.

Which is a shame; but understandable I think.

After all it’s all a bit strange isn’t it? How are we to engage with a story in which Jesus, as if in some early Space programme, lifts off from Bethany towards the heavens? Back in the early days of the Soviet Space programme a cosmonaut, having a dig at the Ascension story, mischievously said he looked for Jesus when orbiting the Earth but could not find him.

Which shows us doesn’t it that while we must take the *Bible* seriously it does not always pay to take it literally. No wonder many a preacher just skips this text.

But here is the thing, strange, discomforting though the story might be it is true.

That truth of course is told in the language and metaphor of another time and place, where the Earth was not round and in orbit around the Sun but flat and covered by a dome and above that the heavens. The Ascension marks the end of a series of narratives going back to the story of the empty tomb. A series of accounts in which the risen Jesus appears for a while, in which sometimes it is only at the very last minute that he is recognised. The Ascension marks the end of these narratives, he is to be seen no more, something new is about to come. You might think a terrible sense of abandonment would have descended on them. Jesus was now “gone” after all, but no. They returned to Jerusalem with joy and hope.

The time between Ascension and Pentecost is a time of anticipation, waiting, preparing for what will be. We approach this time familiar with the story, yet for those who watched and waited for what will come I wonder how it was.

Could they have known that the man who they knew, loved and followed would soon be known, loved and followed by many who had never met him? Could they possibly have any sense that the community of those gathered around his memory was to become radically wider and encompass peoples and places they could have never dreamt of?

They watched and they waited, they did so with a sense of joy and hope. They did so with a sense that this time was not empty time but a time full of possibility.

I wonder though, if we have lost the art of positive waiting.

It is fair to say we have become unaccustomed to waiting. Western cultures do not place much value on waiting nowadays; delayed gratification has little appeal. Time spent waiting is often seen as empty time, wasted time.

Yet recently we have been called upon to wait, to put much of life on hold. We did so in order to defeat Covid 19, to flatten the curve and then to eliminate it from this country. We barely left our homes for a month or more, venturing out a little for exercise and to meet our most basic needs.

Plans were put on hold. Weddings postponed, sports leagues suspended, holiday plans came crashing down, study plans are on hold, especially for those young people who had plans to study abroad. When earlier we had heard that people in China and Italy were living like this we could scarcely believe it but we too entered into the profound limitation of lock down.

It has perhaps gone as well as we might dared have hoped but we had no clear idea that would be the case. Around the world there are people who have been in lock down longer and for whom the path out of it is not yet clear.

What was it like to wait, I cannot say that it quite the experience of those followers of Jesus waiting in Jerusalem after his ascension.

Our lives may have been circumscribed, played out for a while on a much smaller stage but they were not diminished. We found a renewed appreciation for the very nearby. I came to know the gardens of my neighbourhood very well and followed closely the turning of leaves from summer green to the hues of autumn and the ripening of berries from a faint blush to a vivid red. I came to appreciate the still quite mornings when I could spend my first conscious minutes of the day listening to the sounds of the sea, normally hidden by traffic on Queens Drive.

I do not wish to romanticise or sentimentalise the experience of lock down, for many it was very hard and for me it brought its own frustrations. But it also reminded me of the gift of the present moment, not some time way off when life might be better or I might get to do the things I personally had to put on hold.

No, it reminded me that it is this moment, with its challenges, joys, frustrations and injustices that I am in. That this is the moment I am called to truly live in, not to begrudge, resent, or simply wish would go away.

This is the moment I am in, we are in and we are called to inhabit it fully, to live it hopefully. I cannot promise anything as dramatic as the coming of the Spirit at the end of this season of waiting but things we took for granted are bit by bit returning to us.

May each return, the visit to a café, the getting our hair cut, that first couple of days away be greeted with a joy and a renewed appreciation.

May the people we connect and reconnect with renew us in compassion, friendship, love and tenderness.

For in these things is the Spirit renewed in us Amen