

## **Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family**

### **Title: The God Who Lets Go of Our Hands**

#### **Lesson: Luke 24:44-53**

*<sup>44</sup> He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."*

*<sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. <sup>46</sup> He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup> I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." <sup>50</sup> When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. <sup>52</sup> Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. <sup>53</sup> And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*

**(Slide 1)** Today is Ascension Sunday. It is the Sunday on which we remember Jesus ascending into heaven. And it is also the last Sunday of this year's Easter season. So in that spirit, let us share our traditional Easter greeting together: Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

**(Slide 2)** But honestly, the event of the Ascension can feel a little strange or unfamiliar to us. Easter makes sense to us, and we are familiar with it, because it is the victory of Jesus over death. Christmas also makes sense to us and feels familiar, because it is the day God came among us. But the Ascension feels somewhat unfamiliar. Because it is the moment when Jesus leaves.

In today's passage, Jesus blesses the disciples and then departs from them. He is taken up into heaven. But what is even more surprising is what happens next. Scripture tells us that the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Isn't that strange?

Usually when someone we love leaves, we feel sad. The disciples surely loved Jesus. That is why they were heartbroken when Jesus died on the cross, and why they rejoiced when the risen Jesus appeared to them again. So perhaps the disciples wanted to continue staying with Jesus forever. But Jesus had to leave. And after watching him ascend into heaven, they returned to Jerusalem with joy. Why were they joyful?

Perhaps at first the disciples themselves did not understand. Before they encountered the risen Christ, they never could have understood. Before they experienced the resurrection, they were still living in sorrow.

But after Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to them again. And they walked with him. They ate together, laughed together, and traveled together. Even though Jesus was no longer physically before their eyes after ascending into heaven, they were no longer filled with sorrow. Instead, they were filled with joy. Because they finally understood something. Jesus had not left them because he was abandoning them.

Even though Jesus had ascended into heaven, and even though he was no longer physically with them, the disciples no longer received that reality with sadness. Instead, they accepted it with joy, because they realized that Jesus was now with them in a different way. They realized he had not abandoned them.

Friends, there are moments in life when God feels far away. We pray, yet everything feels quiet. Situations do not quickly change. The things we once held onto slowly drift away from us. Perhaps the disciples felt the same way: “What do we do now?” “Are we alone now?”

**(Slide 3)** But Scripture says this: “When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them.”

Before Jesus left, he blessed the disciples. This moment once again reveals the love of Jesus. Jesus blessed them until the very end. And then he departed.

In some ways, this is similar to a parent letting go of a child’s hand. I think people may have different ideas about what makes a good parent. But I once heard someone say, “A good parent does not hold onto a child’s hand forever. A good parent helps a child become independent and able to stand on their own.” And, I agree with that. And at some point, parents let go of the child’s hand so the child can begin walking on their own.

**(Slide 4)** I remember when my son had just turned four and had only recently started pre-kindergarten. Some children adjust to school from the very first day, but many children need time to adapt to a new environment filled with unfamiliar people and unfamiliar surroundings. Sometimes they become anxious. Sometimes sensitive. Sometimes stressed. My son also went through that kind of season.

And watching him go through that was honestly painful as a parent. Because when he is at home, I can do everything for him. But once he goes to school, I cannot stay there with him, and I cannot live his school life for him.

So the best thing I could do for him was this: when we arrived at school, I would pray for him in the car. I would walk him to his classroom, smile brightly, tell him to have a good day and that I would see him soon, and wave goodbye. Trusting that he would eventually adjust well, I let go of his hand and watched him walk into his classroom.

Letting go of someone's hand does not mean love has ended. Sometimes it is actually the moment when a deeper kind of love begins.

Because now you enter into a different kind of trust that says, "I may not always stand right beside you, but I still believe you can do this, and I still love you."

Those of you who have sent your children away to college, or who have watched your children get married, have probably experienced this kind of deep love as well.

**(Slide 5)** As I reflect on Jesus ascending into heaven and leaving the disciples on this earth, I cannot help but think that the Ascension may be something similar. Perhaps the Ascension is the moment when Jesus gently lets go of the disciples' hands.

Jesus blessed the disciples and then ascended into heaven. Now the disciples had to walk on their own. The time when Jesus visibly solved every problem right before their eyes had come to an end. But what is amazing about the work of God is that this is exactly when the Church begins.

The faith of the disciples begins to grow. Prayer begins. The gospel begins spreading throughout the world. And people begin believing in Jesus through the disciples.

Sometimes we want to say to God, "God, can't you just stay visibly beside me?" "Why do you feel so far away?"

There are times when, in the middle of our prayers, we feel that God is silent. Sometimes we even feel disappointed or frustrated with God. But if we think about it differently, perhaps there are moments when God lets go of our hands because God believes in us and wants us to grow.

When God lets go of our hands, it does not mean God has abandoned us. Rather, it means that God is still with us and believes that we are now able to walk by faith.

When we think about our lives, we have all experienced moments like this. Moments when one familiar season ends and a new season begins. For example, when we graduate, when jobs change, when children leave home, when loved ones become distant, or when we stand before new changes in the life of the church.

We often talk about change, but when change actually begins to arrive, we tend to resist it. And so we often say, “Things felt better before.” “Life felt easier back then.”

But God does not allow us to remain in the past forever. The disciples could not stay on the mountain forever, staring only into the sky where Jesus had ascended. They had to go back down to Jerusalem. And they had to continue living there.

But this is what matters most: even though Jesus departed, the blessing he gave them still remained with them. Even though they could no longer physically see Jesus, the love of the Lord was still with them.

And now the disciples finally understood this. That is why they were able to come down from the mountain and return to Jerusalem not with fear, but with joy.

Friends, the same is true for us today. There are moments in our lives that we really want to hold onto. But sometimes God gently lets go of our hands and says to us, “Do not be afraid.” “Now you can walk by faith.” “I am still with you.”

Friends, the Ascension is not the day Jesus disappeared. It is the day when God, and God’s Son Jesus Christ, began to be with us more widely, more deeply, and more closely.

And so today, like the disciples, we return once again to the places of our daily lives.

With joy. With faith.

And trusting in the Lord who is with us even when we cannot see him. Amen.