



**A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter
The Ascension**

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The Ascension

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We are sent to share Christ's love

God has gone up with a shout!

Psalm 47 is quite exuberant, lifting our eyes up towards the heavens. A perfect expression for today, as we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord. The texts make clear that the direction is up! The word Ascension means going up, and all the Christian art for this event shows the Risen Christ lifted up from the earth, leaving his disciples on the ground, whence they will figure out how to do Christ's work on earth. The cover of your bulletin shows this ephemeral ascent, with billowing clouds and lots of angels. That array of angels gives us a clue that this event is archetypal – not a literal ascent, but a beautiful leave-taking, getting us and the new apostles ready for the next stage of our Christian journey.

Our first hymn this morning is consistent with the literal idea of Christ ascending. Called "Hail the day that sees him rise," it paints a pretty picture, with a catchy familiar tune. The author of the words is Charles Wesley, the famous 18th century hymn writer, whose poetry has buoyed our musical celebrations for over two hundred years. Wesley wrote over 6000 hymn texts, including many of our favorites.

When we speak of hymn writers, we are referring only to the words, although the writers may have written the music too. For instance, Martin Luther's hymn writing often included his own compositions, although he was just as likely to use a popular tune from a beerhall. The notation in your hymnal after each hymn separates the citation into "words" and "music."

The Church is blessed with hymn writers from many eras, from the early centuries to today, all reflecting the spirituality of their own times. One contemporary hymn writer is Brian Wren. (WREN, like the bird). Now 88 years old, Mr. Wren really changed our thinking about hymns when he said that hymns were an opportunity to display poetry and theology, not just a piece of music. Mr. Wren wrote new texts for many old favorite tunes. A British scholar with several degrees from Oxford, Mr. Wren has moved with the times. I have one of his books entitled What language should I borrow from 1989. He is married to a Methodist woman minister, and he strives to

make his texts more inclusive than earlier writers, replacing the predominantly male imagery for God and humanity with language that includes all of us. Whenever you see Brian Wren's name on a hymn, you will know that his goal is to "speak truth by stepping beyond the church's limits of comfort and convention."

We just sang one of Mr. Wren's hymns as our sequence hymn this morning. You might want to open your hymnal again to Hymn 603 and consider the words.

He starts with a picture of the Ascension that could be like the classic artistic pose:

When Christ was lifted from the earth, his arms stretched out above

But then he adds an expansion of the idea: *through every culture every birth, to draw an answering love.*

The next verse enlarges the context:

*Still east and west his love extends
and always, near or far,
he calls and claims us as his friends
and loves us as we are.*

Well! I certainly feel included by that! But he is not done.

*Verse 3: Where generation, class, or race
divide us to our shame,
he sees not labels but a face,
a person, and a name.*

Mr. Wren is preaching equality

*Verse 4: Thus freely loved, though fully known,
may I in Christ be free
to welcome and accept his own,
as Christ accepted me.*

This is the work that the Risen Christ left us to do – to accept all people, to spread love near and far, to know that we too are accepted for who we are.

In the scripture text from the book of Acts, the disciples are left looking up as the Risen Christ disappears into thin air. And then the disciples look around them and see two men dressed in white robes – angels perhaps – who point out that the disciples are now Apostles: they are sent out to bring the Good News to the world. We can't just stand there, looking at fluffy clouds. We too are sent, to share Christ's love in the world.