

Video: 'Carriers'

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To see a preview version: <http://www.skitguys.com/videos/carriers>

1. Welcome and introduction

Salamat datang; hwanyong hamnida; malo elelei; bulla; afyo MAI; velkominn; shalom - *welcome* to worship this morning, especially if you are visiting Bathurst Uniting Church virtually for the first time.

I'm Rev. Claire Wright, and I have the privilege of ministering with this community of faith and calling.

Today, we continue in the Church's season of Easter, celebrating the ripples of the resurrection of Christ. In this morning's service, in a way, we'll be glancing back a bit, to where Jesus sat at table with his disciples on the night before his arrest and crucifixion, offering words of comfort, reassurance and hope. But we'll also be glancing forward a bit, to Thursday of this week, 40 days after Easter Sunday, when the risen Christ 'ascends' into heaven. Is it the end of a story – or only the beginning? We'll think about that, today.

We pause to acknowledge the Wiradjuri nation, the first people to name and know this place as a dwelling-place of Spirit in the world.

We honour their heart-felt custodianship of the land on which many of us live, work and worship.

As we come to worship, we pause to remember the presence of Christ in our midst – scattered-gathered though we are. As we prepare to ponder two moments in which it may have felt to Jesus' friends as if he was *leaving* them – perhaps even *abandoning* them – we remember his promise, that he would be with us always; he dwelling in us; and we having life in him.

[The candle is lit.]

2. Call to worship – from today's Lectionary Psalm 47.

Clap your hands, all you nations;
shout to God with cries of joy.
How awesome is the Lord Most High,
the great Ruler over all the earth!
God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.
Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our Sovereign, sing praises!
For God is the Ruler of all the earth:
sing to our God a psalm of praise!

3. **Hymn:** God is gone up on high
(*Together in Song* # 371, verses 1, 3 and 6)

We can't generally post the words to hymns for copyright reasons.
They can easily be found on-line – or in any hymn-book you have at home.
If you would like to borrow one of the church's copies of *Together in Song* for home use during the 'shut-down', please contact us and we'll arrange to drop off a copy.

4. **Prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Let us continue our song of praise in the key of prayer.

Ground of our Being,
we offer you our prayers of heartfelt thanks.

For though you are King of kings,
Maker, Sustainer and Ruler of the cosmos,
You are also Love.

Though you are gone up on high, enthroned in heaven,
You are also Here,
in us and among us, with us and for us,
Giving yourself to us.

Though you are Holy Spirit, Life and Power and wind and fire,
You are also Counsellor,
Comforter, Advocate,
Walking with us,
Dwelling in us,
Working through us.

And so, like a flower that grows against all odds
out of a crack in the rocks,
a sense of deep assurance that we are sustained
by your love keeps coming through, breaking through –
even in the hardest times.

Thank you for the love-shaped story of your presence in the world.

Amen.

5. Prayer of confession

Continuing in prayer, in a quiet moment...

We confess, Loving God,
That at times we cannot help but feel abandoned
Or left to our own devices, in a world of troubling difficulty.
It is easy to lose track of the good,
of things worth fighting for,
when everything seems overwhelming –
and our best efforts seem to have underwhelming results.

Hold us to account in love,
and refresh our hope in ourselves and one another,
that together we can help each other to remember
that we are not alone and that we are loved,
and that you give us gifts and work to do,
to continue your love-shaped story in the world. **Amen.**

(from Words for Worship 21/05/17, MediaCom Publishing)

6. Affirmation of forgiveness

Friends, take heart:
in this Easter season, we affirm again that we need not dwell on our wounds,
for Christ has died to heal us;
we need not dwell on our brokenness,
for Christ has risen to mend all things;
we need not dwell on our frailty,
for Christ has ascended to rule and reign in love for the world.
Thanks be to God!
Amen.

7. **Hymn:** O Christ when you ascended

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette

(To the tune Passion Chorale ['O sacred head, sore wounded'])

O Christ, when you ascended, you took your rightful throne.
Your time on earth had ended – yet we weren't left alone.
You reign o'er earth and heaven; your Spirit guides our way.
Your prayers uphold your people; you lead your church each day.

We're tempted, Lord, to leave you in stories nicely told.
Sometimes we don't believe you – and say your ways are 'old'.
Sometimes we feel so lonely, and live in doubt and fear –
But your Ascension means, Lord, you're present with us here!

It's often quite a challenge to follow in your Way.
We're easily distracted! It's hard, Lord, to obey.
Sometimes we give you Sundays – and hour, maybe two –
But your Ascension means, Lord, all life belongs to you!

One day, O lord, we'll know you, as we are fully known.
One day this world of sinners will bow before your throne.
One day, God's whole creation will sing and praise your name.
On earth – as now in heaven – we'll celebrate your reign.

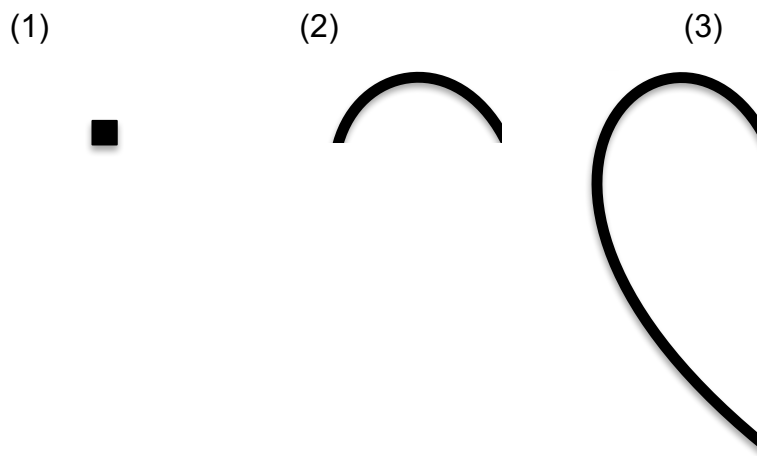
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8. Kids' focus

It's difficult, sometimes, isn't it, when someone we love goes away? We won't see them – at least for a while – and we feel a bit sad, and a bit lonely, and a bit lost... This week, our Bible readings tell us about the time when Jesus had to say goodbye to his friends, because he was going back to his Father in heaven... And they are feeling a bit sad, and a bit lonely and a bit lost – and Jesus explains that they are only seeing *part* of the story...

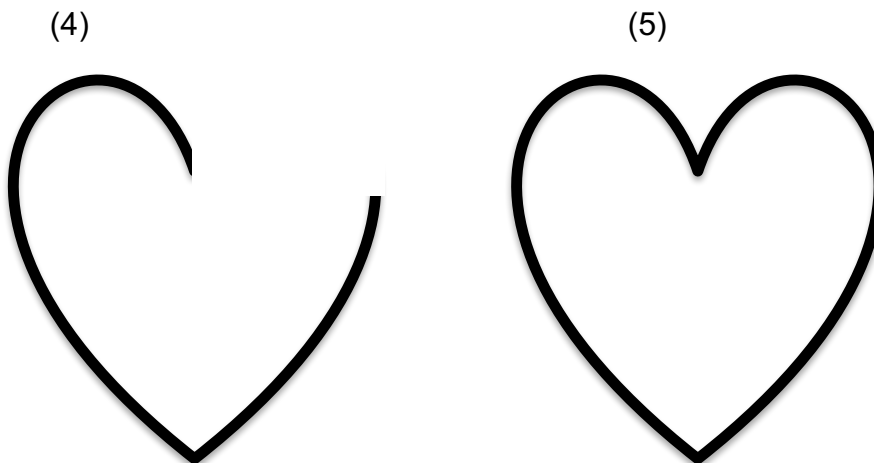
It's a bit like this... In the beginning, he was with God, and he *was* God,

so when God's love exploded into creation – and the story of the world began – he was there. (1) And God so loved the world that God sent him into the world, to be with us and for us (2), even though it would cost him everything – even death on a cross – so that the world could have life and hope and peace (3)...



Hmmm. Now Jesus' friends didn't know whether to feel happy or sad: it seemed like the very *lowest* point of *Jesus'* story was the very *highest* and *best* for the world...

But that's not the end of the story, said Jesus... Death would not hold him down: God would raise him to life again (4) – and then – yes, there was *more!* – God would take him back to Godself, once and for all (5) ...



Hmmm. Now Jesus' friends didn't know whether to feel happy or sad, again: it seemed like the very *highest* point of Jesus' story was the very *lowest* and *saddest* for the world, because Jesus was leaving the world, once and for all... No, no, said Jesus, because that's *still* not the end of the story.

No? said Jesus' friends?

No, said Jesus. Because look: my story, the love-shaped story of God in the world, keeps right on going. In *you*, he said. In everyone who follows my love-shaped path in the world.

Hmmm. Now Jesus' friends didn't know whether to feel happy or sad, again: it was a *wonderful* thing to be asked to continue Jesus' love-shaped story of God in the world, of course – but they really weren't sure they *could*, without Jesus with them, to show them the way. Left alone, they tended to... [*Toy truck drives round in circles...*]

Don't worry, said Jesus. [*Catches truck and placing it at the top of the heart-shaped path*]. You never *will* be alone. You may not see me, but I'll always be right there, showing you the way; with you and in you as you go. We'll tell the love-shaped story of God in the world, together... [*Truck sets off again – and this time, somehow, it follows the heart-shaped line!...*]

And so, mysteriously, they did. And so can we...

9. **Hymn:** Hallelujah! Sing to Jesus
(*Together in Song* #517, verses 1 and 2)

10. **Bible readings**

John 14: 15-21

Andrew Alder

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth – whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides *with* you – and he will be *in* you.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while, the world will no longer see me – but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day, you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you..."

In this is the Gospel of Christ.

Acts 1: 3-9

Pete Sackett

After his suffering, Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking about the kingdom of God.

While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit, not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

The Feast of the Ascension isn't until Thursday, but I thought we'd talk about it a bit today. We hardly *ever* talk about it – and that's a pity, because it is, in fact, one of the major pillars of what we say we believe about Jesus Christ. It's right there at the heart of the Apostle's Creed: 'He ascended into heaven' – and I can almost guarantee that most of us have spent our whole church-going lives skipping over that phrase. As Protestants, we're pretty good at thinking about 'Christ crucified', and during this season after Easter, we can generally get our heads around 'Christ crucified and risen' – but the testimony of the Church is that this is not the whole story. There's more: 'Christ crucified, risen and *ascended*.'

So why is the Ascension of Christ a bit fuzzy on our mental radar? For one thing, perhaps, the Ascension is commemorated on a *Thursday* – so there isn't a Sunday to command our worshipful attention... On the other hand, the Ascension is commemorated on a *Thursday*, which – for those who listened carefully to our Acts reading – or those switched onto maths by recent home-schooling! – is *40 days* after Resurrection Sunday. Whenever the Bible says 40 days – or 40 years – it tends sign-post a time of *preparation*: getting ready for Something Big, a radical new calling, a wild new mission in the world.

For another thing, though, I think we tend to skip over the Ascension because it's – well, it's *awkward*. If we try to visualise it – Jesus drifting or soaring or dancing upwards into the clouds, with everyone looking up from below – as it's often portrayed in religious art... well, is it just me, or does it conjure up all sorts of irreverent pictures, from 'Beam me up, Scotty' to Superman saying 'Up, up and away!'...? Actually, it can't just be me, because I know of at least one small boy who, told the Ascension story, objected: 'But there's no UP in outer space!' And of course, he's quite right. There's no UP from the surface of a round earth, either. We don't believe, as the Biblical writers did, in a tiered cosmos, where heaven was the next layer up, above the sky. We can see the absurdity in astronaut Yuri Gagarin's reported comment that he'd been to space, and hadn't seen God 'up there'... So perhaps, as we grapple with what the Ascension means, we simply need to let go of 'up'. This isn't about spatial direction. It's about Christ being lifted up to his rightful place; exalted by the Father to the place of glory and dominion over all things...

And if we can let go of the 'up, up', as we think about the Ascension, perhaps we can also let go of the 'and away'. Because if we envisage Christ going 'up there' somewhere, getting smaller and smaller, hidden finally by the clouds, going out of the world into some Elsewhere beyond the skies – it's more than 'awkward': it's deeply painful. It suggests that God – God in *Christ*, once so intimately one of us, with us and for us – is now distant from us, separated, absent from the world... That must have been how it seemed to Jesus' first followers: losing him once to death – and now again! Losing his physical presence; losing the Jesus who sat with them and talked with them and cried with them; the Jesus who hugged lepers, and broiled fish, and broke bread and poured wine; the Jesus who made *sense* of it all, and set their world on *fire* with stories and love and hope and passion and purpose...

This, finally, was the end of the Jesus story. This was goodbye. The feet that walked the dusty roads of Palestine would not walk the earth again... But no. That's *not* the whole story: it can't be. This is the same Christ who said he would be with us, even to the end of time. The same Christ who said he was *not* leaving us orphaned in the universe: that we are in him, and he in us.

We in him, and he in us, he said to his disciples. 'I in the Father, and you in me, and I in you.' And *this*, friends, this is where we glimpse the real, heart-stirring, world-shaking meaning of the Ascension – if we're paying attention. Because it's not the end of the story: it's a new beginning.

Christ has resumed his place with God, his place within the Godhead – *and he has taken his full humanness with him*. The testimony that he went *physically* into heaven reminds us that incarnation is not just for Christmas. In Christ, incarnate, crucified, risen and *ascended*, the human body is not only valued by God – embraced and inhabited by God – but, finally, *glorified*: scars and all... In Christ incarnate, crucified, risen and *ascended*, we are assured that none of our em-bodied realities – our needs and vulnerabilities, our imperfections and beauties, our gender or age or skin colour – keep us from God: in the Ascension, they are welcomed and *held* by God, in God.

And there's *more*. Because it is *this Christ* who is raised to the highest place, enthroned and triumphant, Lord over all the earth. This same Christ who understands our humanness inside out, who bears in his body, even in glory, the marks of suffering and love. We have no other *Lord* than this, the Ascension says: no Caesar or emperor, no political system or economic idol. And we have no other Lord than *this*: a Lord of compassion and mercy, love and generosity and justice; a Lord who would rather die by violence than rule with violence.

And there's *more*. 'Truly I tell you,' says Jesus to his disciples (John 16:7) 'it is for your *good* that I am going away, so that I can send the Spirit to you – the Advocate, the Helper.' We are *not* left orphaned. We are not being abandoned or left alone. Christ's presence continues to be available to us, with us and for us, even – especially – in the toughest times; as near to us as breath... The Spirit comes – abides with us, Jesus says, *lives in* us: God's inspiration and encouragement – new life, new heart – all the gifts and guidance we need to continue God's love-shaped story in the world.

Because – yes, there's *more!* The physical presence of Jesus Christ is gone from the world – and we – we – are now the 'body of Christ'. We are called to pattern our lives after his – to *live* his love-shaped, cross-shaped life. We, now, are Christ 'with skin on' to the broken world he loves. As the plaque reads on a famous statue of Christ in Dresden, half destroyed by bombing during WWII: 'He has now no hands or feet but yours.'...

So friends, let's not overlook the feast of the Ascension, this Thursday. It's not just a small, heart-rending pastoral crisis for Jesus' followers. Not just an obscure through important theological footnote for the Church. It's a heart-stirring, world-shaking moment for *all* of us. 'You in me,' says Jesus: humanity drawn into the life of eternity. 'I in you,' says Jesus: eternity drawn into the life of the world. And therefore all of us – *all* of us – swept 'up' into something higher and bigger and more glorious than we have dared to dream...

12. **Hymn:** God, we've known such grief and anger
Carolyn Winfrey Gillette
(*To the tune 'Abbots Leigh' ['God is love, let heaven adore him']*)

God, we've known such grief and anger
As we've heard your people cry.
We have asked you, 'How much longer?'
We have sadly wondered 'Why?'
In this world of so much suffering,
May we hear your word anew:
'I will never leave you orphaned;
I will not abandon you.'

By your grace comes resurrection;
By your love, you cast out fear.
You give strength and sure direction
As we seek to serve you here.
You give comfort to the grieving,
And you bless the ones who mourn.
May we trust in you, believing
Out of chaos, hope is born.

Hope is ours for, God, you love us!
You have claimed us by your grace.
And through Jesus, you have called us
To bring hope to every place.
In each nurse' or doctor's caring,
In each faithful volunteer,
In each Christian's love and sharing,
God, we glimpse your kingdom here.

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13. Prayers of the people

Allan, Emily and Robyn Wray

Loving and gracious God,
we turn to you with the prayers of your people.

We pray for the world in which we live.

Wherever there is hatred, we pray for love.
In places of war, we pray for peace.

Where people live in hardship and struggle,
let the abundance of our world's wealth and knowledge bring wholeness.

Where lives are threatened by disaster or disease,
bless and strengthen those who work for healing and restoration.

Give wisdom to all in authority, at this time, as they juggle the
complex demands of economies, communities and lives.

(Silent prayer)

We pray for the life of your church throughout the world.
Help us to share your story faithfully –
and to serve our communities with joy and compassion.

Help us always to remember our calling,
to follow the love-shaped Way of Jesus in the world.

(Silent prayer)

We come before you as your beloved children.
Help us to live fully, led by your Spirit.

We ask for your healing, comfort and strength
for those who are struggling
with illness, grieving, loneliness, hardship and uncertainty.

Give us grace to face each day with the confidence
that you hold us – and will never let us go.

(Silent Prayer)

In offering our prayers
may we be willing to be part of the answer.

In the name of the Christ. **Amen.**

And we join together in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, in whatever
language or version is closest to our hearts.

Our Father...

14. Hymn: Be thou my vision
(Together in Song # 547, verses 1, 2, 3 and 5)

15. Blessing and sending out –
from today's Lectionary Epistle, Paul's letter to the Ephesians

Now may the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe. (*Ephesians 1: 17-19*)

Go then, to live in – and live out – the love-shaped story of God in the world, knowing that you are not alone. Jesus Christ, crucified, risen and ascended, is Lord of all – and with us always, even to the end of the age.

The blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, go with you into the world and the week. Amen.