After World War 2, a United States Army officer and his wife were stationed in Japan. Japan’s economy had been devastated. Unemployment was 60%. Every day people came to the officer’s wife’s door looking for work. One man gave her a written note in English saying that he could look after her garden. So this young Army wife hired him. He spoke no English but through sign language and diagrams she told him where to prune and plant. He followed her instructions exactly. The garden was soon the most beautiful in the neighbourhood. Finally she stopped giving him instructions and let him freely care for the garden. It was magnificent. Then the gardener came to her one day with an interpreter and expressed his regrets. He had to leave the job. The woman said she was very sorry but thanked him for making such a fine garden. She asked the interpreter, “Where is he going?” The interpreter replied that the gardener was returning to his old job as Professor of Horticulture at Tokyo University. Imagine the surprise of the woman when she discovered who her gardener really was.

From Acts 1, we read of Jesus’ ascension or his return to heaven. Think of all he had done. The Son of God had become flesh and revealed the true and living God through his own life and works and teaching. He was obedient to the Father’s will in all things, even unto death on a cross, where his bore the sins of the world in his own sinless body. He reconciled the world to God and opened the gates to eternal life for all who put their trust in Him. By his resurrection from the dead he defeated the power of sin and death and inaugurated the Kingdom of God upon earth. Then the Risen Lord spent forty days with his disciples presenting himself alive to them with many convincing proofs and teaching them about the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ identity was no longer a surprise or a mystery to the disciples. They knew for sure that he was the Son of God, risen from the dead, and alive for evermore, the Saviour of all people and the Saviour for all people. So Jesus’ work on earth, at least the work of his first coming, was now complete. The time had come for him to return to the heavenly realm. Acts 1:9 reads, “… as the disciples were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

In the Bible a cloud signifies the presence and the glory and the power of
God. So Jesus’ ascension was a mighty work of God. Acts 1:10 & 11 says, ‘And while he was going and they were gazing up to heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”’

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” Well, the answer was obvious. That’s where their Lord was and they were filled with wonder at what had just taken place. Naturally they were looking up to heaven.

Here’s the first thing I want to say today. Jesus’ ascension invites us to look upward, upward to heaven.

Under the influence of secular culture I think Christians have become, if anything, too earthly minded. The attraction of worldly things keeps our eyes turned downward. Our horizons have narrowed. But we should look up to heaven more often. For that’s where our hope is. Hebrews tells us that hope is an anchor for the soul. And this hope is anchored in heaven where Jesus has gone as the forerunner on our behalf. Our resurrected Lord is in the Father’s house where he ever lives to make intercession for us. So too are the loved ones who died in the faith. They are not gone from us forever; they are waiting for us on the heavenly shore. Look up to heaven, for Hebrews tells us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who cheer us on as we run the race.

Furthermore, we are invited to look up to heaven because it’s from there that we receive resources for our earthly journey. Jesus told the disciples not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait and pray for the promise of the Father. Acts 1:7, 8 “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” he said, ”and you will be my witnesses.” Then ten days after Jesus had ascended into heaven, on the day of Pentecost, the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and went boldly into Jerusalem, preaching the Gospel. The strength and the courage they needed came to them from above.

So it is for us, too. Life makes great demands on us. Our need for courage and wisdom and hope and patience and grace are very great. But these gifts don’t originate within us. They come to us from above, from the eternal, spiritual realm. We don’t strengthen ourselves. We do all things through Him who strengthens us. So we are invited to look up to heaven. For that’s where our hope is anchored. That’s where the inner resources we need come from.
Secondly, Jesus’ ascension invites us to look outward.

Some commentators detect a slight rebuke in the angels’ question, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?” Perhaps so. Or perhaps it was an invitation. They were now being invited to take their eyes off heaven, and focus on their mission of being Jesus’ witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” They were to look outward and see those who needed Jesus.

I think we neglect the outward look because we have neglected the upward look. But as we look up to heaven, and take hold of that great hope God has given us in Christ, we start to look outward and to share that hope with others. You know, we don’t speak of hell much anymore. We use words like lost and away, instead. But the reality is the same. There is an alternative to heaven and people are going to spend eternity in one place or the other. Now we hope and pray for all to be saved, and only God really knows a person’s heart but we are not universalists who believe that everyone automatically goes to heaven. And so the church looks outward and shares Christ so that as many as possible will hear and believe the Gospel.

A group of dissidents left a congregation to form the “perfect” church. They put a sign outside their church: “JESUS ONLY.” It sounded great, but the church didn’t reach out; they ministered only to themselves. One day the first three letters of the sign fell down and revealed the truth about that church. It read, “US ONLY.”

Yes, we are to love and care for one another in our fellowship, but the church can never be just “US ONLY”. The church is to look outward. In fact, it can truly be said that the church exists as much for those outside its walls as for those inside.

A man in our congregation goes to the same restaurant here in town almost every day for lunch. The regular clients know him and he knows them and he often engages them in conversation, speaking to them about God and Jesus and the Bible and things in the news which have a spiritual dimension. He doesn’t browbeat anyone, but he has invited a few to church. And though hardly any have accepted his invitation, that hasn’t discouraged him. Now doing this is not everyone’s cup of tea, but I do give him credit. He is looking outward, concerned for the spiritual well-being of others and being a witness for Jesus.

“Why are you gazing up toward heaven?” Well, there is a time to do that but Jesus’ ascension reminds us that we are also to be looking outward. For “you will be my witnesses.”
Finally, Jesus’ ascension invites us to look forward.

Now of course, we need to look behind us to the record of the great events which have formed and shaped our faith and the church. We don’t dismiss history, not for a moment. But some of God’s great works are still in the future. And that’s why we look forward, too. The angels told the disciples, “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Now as Scripture declares, the day of Jesus’ return is fixed by God, though it’s hidden from us. Speculation is foolish. The way one prepares is through faith in Jesus Christ who lived and died and rose again for us, bearing our sins, and preparing us for that day. Trusting in Him, we have nothing to fear. We are forgiven. We have a righteous standing before God. We belong to God’s redeemed people now, and God is not going to cast us aside. You and I will be carried safely over the waves of judgement into the Father’s house. That promise is given to all who trust in Christ as Saviour. Here at the Lord’s Supper you are invited to confirm and renew your faith in Christ, or even to trust him and receive him for the first time, if you’ve never done so.

Yes, we look forward because God has great things planned for his people. God is making all things new. He is making a new heaven and a new earth and right now he is making a new person in you and in me, forming and shaping us in the image of his Son.

Billy Graham speaks of visiting an elderly missionary who spent most of his life in China. His deep dedication to Christ and his love for the people caused them to admire him deeply. He was a faithful witness. But then he developed a terminal illness. Billy Graham went to share words of comfort with him. But actually the man witnessed to Billy Graham. “There was a joy and radiance about him that I have rarely seen,” Billy Graham said. “He got up out of bed and walked me to the car when I left. I shall never forget it. With a smile and cheery wave, he said, “Keep on preaching the Gospel, Billy. The older I get, the better Jesus is to me.”

Yes followers of Jesus have much to look forward to in this world, and in the world to come. God’s work is not finished in us, not by a long shot. And even when we take our last earthly breath, God will continue his work in us in heaven. So Jesus’ ascension invites us to look upward, to look outward and to look forward. For Scripture declares that “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”