Author James W. Moore tells the story of a young mother who was trying to get her toddler son to take some liquid medicine. The little fellow was having none of it. He closed his mouth as tightly as he could, shook his head furiously from side to side and even hit at the spoon with both hands, sending the medicine flying everywhere. The young mother tried everything. She pleaded, she begged, she threatened—all to no avail. Finally she couldn't take it any more. She threw the spoon down and ran out of the room. Reaching her bedroom she flung herself across the bed and broke down in tears of frustration and helplessness.

In a few minutes she heard the sound of laughter coming from the kitchen. Curious about what was happening, she wiped the tears from her eyes and made her way in the direction of the mirth. She discovered that her mother had solved the problem. She had mixed the medicine with orange juice, put the concoction in a water pistol and was squirting into the mouth of her delighted grandson (From the sermon “Open the Eyes of My Heart” by King Duncan).

You see, sometimes you have to look at a problem in a different way. Right, grandmas and grandpas? In fact, often in life it is not what you see, but how you see it that really matters.

I think the Apostle Paul understood this and so in our passage today he says to the church in Ephesus. “I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see what is the hope of God’s call, what is the richness of God’s glorious inheritance among believers.” Isn’t that an interesting phrase: "that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see . . ." It reminded me of the song we are going to sing a little later in the service, "Open the eyes of my heart, Lord . . ." Lord, reveal what I cannot see. Help me to see beyond the horizon of rational thought, facts, statistics and science. Help me to see possibilities and opportunities instead.

The Rev. Edward Chinn was for many years Rector of All Saints'
Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He once wrote a column entitled "Looking at Life's Many Horizons." He began with a song sung by Jeanette MacDonald in the 1930 Paramount picture "Monte Carlo." The refrain to that song says:

"Beyond the blue horizon waits a beautiful day. 
Goodbye to things that bore me. Joy is waiting for me. 
I see a new horizon. My life has only begun. 
Beyond the blue horizon lies a rising sun."

"What is the horizon?" asked Ed Chinn. "The horizon is the line that forms the boundary between earth and sky" (From the sermon “Open the Eyes of My Heart” by King Duncan). It is the limit of one's vision. It is the extent of what we can actually see. But wouldn’t it be foolish to think there is nothing beyond what we can see. And wouldn’t it show a lack of faith on our part to think there are only frightening things beyond what we know - when beyond the blue horizon lies a rising sun (son)?

There is an interesting map on display in the British Museum in London. It’s an old mariner’s chart, drawn in 1525, outlining the North American coastline and adjacent waters. The cartographer made some intriguing notations on areas of the map that represented regions beyond the then explored horizons. In one place he wrote: "Here be giants." In another: "Here be fiery scorpions," and in another: "Here be dragons."

Eventually, the map came into the possession of Sir John Franklin, a British explorer in the early 1800s. Scratching out the fearful inscriptions, he wrote these words across the map: "Here is God" (http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/u/unknown.htm). Sir John was a wise man and there is a lesson in his wisdom for those of us living in the 21st century. Rather than fearing what lies just beyond the horizon, we need to remember that beyond what we know is exactly where we will find God if we just open the eyes of our hearts.

Imagine for a moment the horizon Jesus of Nazareth faced. He faced a horizon made up of fences. The 'Holiness Code' of his tradition was summed up in these words: 'Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy' (Leviticus 19:2). To first century Jews being holing meant being separated from everything that would defile holiness. Figurative fences were erected separating clean and unclean, pure and defiled,
sacred and profane, Jew and Gentile, righteous and sinner. Facing these fences, Jesus introduced an alternative way—the way of compassion. Jesus said, 'Be compassionate, as God is compassionate' (Luke 6:36). While others drew circles to exclude people, Jesus drew a wider circle to include those who had been shut out. He knew the horizon changes once you dare to go beyond what you can presently see.

So what do we see on the horizon? What are the fences of our day?

Well, just this past week a new study was released by the Pew Research Center that would seem to indicate Christianity in America is declining at an alarming rate. The report stated that in 2007 78.3% of Americans considered themselves Christian. 7 years later in 2014 that percentage was 70.3%, a drop of 8%. Now when you take into account the rise in population occurring over that same period of time, this translates into a decrease of about 5 million Americans (http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/). Another startling statistic contained in the report was that for every new convert to Christianity, 4 other people leave the church. One young man I saw interviewed on CBS said that although his parents had always taken him to church as he was growing up, he no longer attends now that he is on his own. He said (and I quote), “Going to church adds no value to my life.”

Now some of us hear this story and these statistics and fear it is a death knell for Christianity and the church. We look at the horizon and see tall fences, giants, scorpions, and dragons. But what if God is in these statistics also? What if the decrease in Christianity is simply a wake up call for the Church—a call to dare to go beyond the established way of doing church? What if, as the current Methodist slogan states, we are being called to “re-think” church? And what if, due to this re-thinking, the church will be stronger tomorrow than it is today? What if the percentages are down but the number of loving, truly committed disciples of Jesus Christ out there transforming the world is up (not just sitting in the pews)? What if we are the ones called to show those leaving the fold or outside of the fold just how much value knowing Jesus adds to life? Maybe it is all in how we look at things. Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord!

As children and students many of us have had the pleasure of reading
Treasure Island and Kidnapped. But did you know that Robert Louis Stevenson, the novelist who wrote these books, faced the horizon of illness all his short life. (He only lived to be 44). Well, one day his wife entered Stevenson bedroom while he was having an uncontrollable coughing fit. When it subsided, she said to him, 'I suppose you will tell me that it's a glorious day.' Stevenson replied, 'Yes, I was just going to say that.' Then looking at the sunlight streaming through the window, he continued, 'I refuse to let a row of medicine bottles be the circumference of my horizon’" (From the sermon “Open the Eyes of My Heart” by King Duncan).

How about you? Will you refuse to allow doom and gloom to be the circumference of your horizon? of Christianity’s horizon? of Bethany’s horizon?

My friends, this is Ascension Sunday. It is the day we celebrate Christ's Ascension into heaven. It is a day to lift our eyes from worldly preoccupations to spiritual possibilities. Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord, open the eyes of our heart. Because on this day we need the eyes of our heart opened. We need to see life in a new way – not as a series of seemingly insurmountable problems, but as opportunities for God’s love and power to shine forth in our lives and in the world. We need to remember it was God’s power that raised Jesus from the dead and that same power is available to raise us from the doom and gloom of death whether that death is literal or figurative. We need to remember that Jesus ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty, and even now intercedes for us (and his church).

So I ask you: When you look at the future, how hopeful is your horizon? Do your thoughts of the future attempt to put limits on God’s power? Have you already decided what the outcome will be? Is that the future you want to live into? Or do you trust that beyond the blue horizon lies a rising SON?

Yes, sometimes all we can see are shadows. But the Ascension of Christ reminds us that the reason we are so aware of the shadows is that behind them the light of God's glory is shining. This world is not our home. Eventually all of us, like Christ, will ascend to be united with those we love and with God. In the meantime, how we look at the horizon will impact how we live our lives. Open the eyes of our hearts,
Lord, open the eyes of our hearts. That is our prayer this day. Help us see Christ high and lifted up, let us live lives that are high and lifted up, let us help others see Jesus shining in the light of his glory. Amen.