

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Ascension of the Lord
Sunday, June 1, 2025**

**“While He Was Blessing Them”
Luke 24:44-53**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

I wonder: if I hadn't said, in my welcome, that this is Ascension of the Lord Sunday, how many of you would have known that it was Ascension of the Lord Sunday? Now the Choir knew, but they got the Order of Service on Thursday! I expect that very few of you woke up this morning all excited to celebrate the Ascension. In fact, I didn't see even one of you burst in this morning with cheery greetings of “Happy Ascension Sunday!”

Compared to other major dates in the Christian liturgical calendar, the Ascension receives probably the least attention: compared to Christmas and Epiphany, compared to Good Friday and Easter Sunday, Ascension is scarcely noticed. In most of the churches I've served, I could probably have skipped Ascension altogether, and hardly anyone would've noticed; I can't quite say the same about Christmas.

And yet, the doctrine of the Ascension is crucial to Christian theology. It's pivotal—it's really the pivot point in the Apostles' Creed; in the Creed, everything about Christ is in the past tense right up until the Ascension: “*was* crucified, died, and *was* buried; he *descended* to the dead. On the third day he *rose* again; he *ascended* into heaven, he *is seated* (present tense) at the right hand of the Father.” The Ascension ushers in the present life of the church, as we serve our Risen and Ascended Lord. And yet, this day is frequently forgotten: why?

I think this has a lot to do with our uncertainty about why the Ascension is Good News. Christmas, Epiphany, Holy Week, Easter—we get that all these bear witness to the grace and love of God; but Ascension, well—maybe it's not so obvious.

And yet, our Gospel Lesson is very clear that the disciples responded to the Ascension with joy: Luke writes, “And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God” (vv. 52-53). Notice, they don't just respond with joy but “with great joy” (μετὰ χαρᾶς μεγάλης), and they don't just bless God in the temple, but they bless God

in the temple “continually” (καὶ ᾤσαν διὰ παντός): they’re “bursting with joy” as they “spen[d] all their time [...] praising God” (Peterson).

But I think we are rather uncertain about why the disciples respond this way to the Ascension—as Christ departs from them. In the Ascension, the Risen Christ passed beyond the limits of human perception, beyond what we can see or perceive, entering into the heavenly realm far beyond our understanding. As Luke describes it: “While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven” (vv. 50-51). Notice, Christ “withdrew” from the disciples; in the original language, the word (δύστημι) simply means “to go away” (Trenchard) or to “depart” (Mounce). That is, in the Ascension, Jesus leaves.

And with that, I think we’re unsure about what seems to be a disconnect here: Jesus withdrew, so why do the disciples rejoice? Jesus left, so why are they joyful? I think we find it hard to get our heads around why the disciples greet the Ascension as Good News. And we’re certainly not alone in our confusion in this; in fact, I think a helpful illustration of this uncertainty can be found in how the Ascension is usually depicted in Christian art.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen an artistic depiction of the Ascension in which the disciples were presented as joyful. They’re often depicted in art as confused or anguished as Christ withdraws from their presence. And our beautiful stained-glass depiction of the Ascension here at New St. James is no exception; in this artistic depiction, a detail of which is on the cover of the Order of Service, the expressions of the disciples range from mournful to solemn to severe; there’s no hint of joy anywhere to be found. Why? Again, because we have trouble grasping why Jesus withdrawing is supposed to bring joy. So why is the Ascension Good News? Why is Christ departing a reason to rejoice?

Shortly before the crucifixion, Jesus told the disciples that he would depart from them—yet that his departure would induce the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told the disciples, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now,” yet he promised, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth [...]. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you” (John 13:37, 14:16-18). At the same time, Jesus made clear that only with his departure would they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, telling the disciples: “it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7, NIV).

The Ascension signals the coming gift of the Holy Spirit. This is even reflected in the liturgical calendar; today is Ascension, and next Sunday is...Pentecost.

Ascension is the prelude to Pentecost—because the Risen Christ promised that, as he ascends to the nearer presence of God the Father, then we can look with hope to the coming of his Spirit—the gift of Christ’s presence alongside us.

See, Ascension is not fundamentally about Christ’s withdrawal—but about Christ drawing near. During his earthly ministry, Christ could gather only with small numbers, his closest followers or sometimes larger crowds. Yet the Ascension means that, because of the grace of God, Christ’s presence will now be shared broadly, that—by the power of the Holy Spirit—Christ will become present to us all.

It turns out that Christ’s apparent withdrawal in the Ascension—his seeming departure—it turns out that this is in fact the moment of Christ drawing near. John Calvin, a sixteenth-century Reformer, explains it like this—that Christ ascended into heaven not to be taken away from us but to become nearer still. He writes: “Carried up into heaven, therefore, [Christ] withdrew his bodily presence from our sight [...], not to cease to be present with believers still on their earthly pilgrimage, but to rule heaven and earth with a more immediate power. By his ascension,” Calvin writes, Christ “fulfilled what he had promised: that he would be with us even to the end of the world. As his body was raised up above all the heavens, so his power and energy were diffused and spread beyond all the bounds of heaven and earth” (II.16.14). And so, Calvin adds, Christ “lavishes spiritual riches upon [us] [...], transfusing us with his power [...] [and] adorn[ing] his church with divers[e] gifts of his grace” (II.16.16).

I said before that the Ascension is pivotal: it’s the pivot point in the Apostles’ Creed, where the past tense of Christ’s ministry becomes the present tense of the life of the church. And that is where, right now, the church lives and grows and trusts in God; we live in what is essentially the age of the Ascension, in between the coming of Christ and the coming again of Christ; the present tense of Christian faith is our life of faith, trusting in Christ who has ascended to God and who gives us the gift of his presence by the Holy Spirit. And as we look to our Ascended Lord, we also remember that Christ knows what it is like to struggle like us; Christ, who knew the fullness of suffering and experienced even death itself, has now ascended to God to give us the Holy Spirit.

The theologian Helmut Thielicke writes: “Could there be a greater message than that of a love which surrendered itself to the deepest humiliation [on the cross] but which also was enthroned at the right hand of God, where it now holds sway

over the earth, secure in the promise of victory? Whoever knows this promise [...] can never completely despair. If catastrophes come, if I hit a stretch of bad luck, if I am forsaken, or if age robs me of one loved one after another, anxiety can no longer bid me take cover, for that is when the royal promise tells me to lift up my head because my redemption is drawing near.” He adds, “Whoever has rejoiced in this triumph and this comfort just once, as [they] wandered through a dark valley [...] knows that *it is precisely in the depths that the Ascended One surrounds us with his nearness*. It is there that we learn to comprehend what a song of praise can be.”

This is why the Ascension is cause for joy. Ascension of the Lord Sunday—this quiet and often overlooked date in the liturgical calendar—bears witness to the grace of God in Christ, whose seeming withdrawal signals his loving nearness. Thanks be to God—and Happy Ascension Sunday! Amen.