

Ascension Sunday

The Ascension of Jesus can feel, at first glance, like an absence story.

After the wonder of Easter appearances, after meals shared and wounds touched and hope rekindled, Jesus is taken from the disciples' sight. A cloud hides him. The disciples stand staring upward, suspended between bewilderment and longing. And perhaps we understand that feeling better than we would like to admit.

Because much of the spiritual life can feel like learning to trust a Christ we cannot physically see.

There are moments when faith feels vivid and close, and there are moments when God seems hidden behind clouds. There are seasons in life when we wish Jesus would simply stand beside us plainly and unmistakably—when grief overwhelms us, when the future feels uncertain, when the Church struggles, when the world appears exhausted by conflict and fear. We often imagine that faith would be easier if Jesus were simply here in the way he once was for the disciples in Galilee.

And yet the mystery of Ascension Day is that Jesus does not become less present to the world. He becomes present in a different way.

This feast is not really about Jesus going away. It is about Jesus filling all things.

That extraordinary phrase from Ephesians sits at the heart of today's readings. Paul speaks of Christ ascending "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion," and then declares that Christ now "fills all in all." The ascension is not Christ retreating from creation but Christ being enthroned within it as Lord of all creation.

The one who walked the roads of Nazareth and Jerusalem now cannot be confined to one place, one people, or one moment in history. During his earthly ministry, Jesus could be with the disciples in Galilee or Jerusalem, but not both at once. He could sit at one table at a time. But now the risen and ascended Christ is present everywhere. Present to every generation. Present in every place where love, mercy, truth, and grace break into the world. The Ascension means that there is nowhere Christ cannot reach. And that changes everything.

The disciples, however, do not understand this immediately. In Acts, they are still asking earthly questions: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” They are still imagining political restoration, visible power, immediate resolution. But Jesus redirects them away from speculation and toward vocation.

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses.”

Then he is lifted up.

And they stand there staring into heaven.

One of the most gently humorous moments in Scripture follows.

Two figures in white robes ask them, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” In other words: do not confuse the Ascension with abandonment. Do not become paralysed by nostalgia for how things were. The mission is not over. It is just beginning.

Because Christ’s presence is now mediated differently—through the Spirit, through the community of believers, through the sacramental life of the Church, through acts of compassion and courage and reconciliation.

The Ascension marks the transition from the ministry of Jesus beside the disciples to the ministry of Christ within and among his people.

And perhaps this is one of the hardest transitions in faith.

We often long for certainty that can be touched and seen. We want God to act in unmistakable ways. We want clear answers, visible signs, immediate interventions. But the Ascension invites us into a more mature faith—a faith that learns to recognise Christ’s presence in quieter, deeper, wider ways.

In bread broken and shared.

In forgiveness offered.

In justice pursued.

In communities that endure hardship without surrendering hope.

In the strange persistence of grace.

The ascended Christ fills all in all.

That means Christ is not absent from the ordinary. He is not locked away in heaven while the earth struggles on alone. Rather, heaven and earth have become joined in a new way through him.

This is why Paul prays in Ephesians that the Church may have “the eyes of your heart enlightened.” Notice that he does not pray for

more information. He prays for perception. Spiritual sight. The ability to recognise the reality already present among them. Because the problem is rarely that Christ is absent. The problem is that we do not always know how to see.

We miss him because we expect only the spectacular.

But the ascended Christ fills hospital rooms and nursing homes. He fills classrooms and kitchens. He fills places of prayer and places of sorrow. He fills exhausted people who wonder whether they have anything left to give. He fills communities quietly trying to remain faithful in difficult times.

Christ fills all in all.

And importantly, this presence is not vague spirituality. It is the presence of the crucified and risen one. The wounds of Jesus do not disappear at the Ascension. The one enthroned over all creation still bears the marks of love poured out for the world.

So when we say Christ reigns, we do not mean domination in the worldly sense. We do not mean coercive power or triumphalism. The ascended Lord reigns through self-giving love. The centre of the universe is not force but grace.

That is why Matthew's Gospel places the Great Commission alongside worship and doubt. "When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted."

What an honest sentence that is.

Even here, at the culmination of the resurrection appearances, some still hesitate. Some are uncertain. Some cannot fully comprehend what they are seeing.

And Jesus sends them anyway.

The mission of God has never depended upon flawless certainty. It depends upon Christ's faithfulness.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," Jesus says. Therefore go.

Notice the logic. The mission is not grounded in the disciples' strength or competence or certainty. It is grounded in Christ's authority and Christ's presence.

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

That promise echoes through the whole Gospel of Matthew. At the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus is named Emmanuel—God with us. And here at the end, the promise remains unchanged. The manner of his presence has changed, but the reality has not.

God with us in birth.

God with us in suffering.

God with us in death.

God with us in resurrection.

God with us still in ascension.

The Church lives between Ascension and Pentecost learning how to trust this promise.

And perhaps we are still learning it now.

Because there are times when the Church feels small or uncertain.

Times when faith feels fragile. Times when prayer seems unanswered. Times when the world's pain feels overwhelming. In such moments, Ascension Day reminds us that Christ is not defeated by the state of the world or by the weakness of the Church.

He fills all things still.

Not always obviously.

Not always dramatically.

But persistently.

Quietly.

Faithfully.

The ascended Christ continues to draw creation toward its healing and renewal.

And we are invited to participate in that work.

The disciples are told not to stand staring into heaven because Christian faith is never escapism. Ascension does not pull us away from the world's needs; it sends us more deeply into them. If Christ fills all things, then every part of life matters. Every act of mercy matters. Every effort toward reconciliation matters. Every moment of courage matters.

The ascended Christ is encountered not by escaping the world, but by loving it in his name.

Perhaps that is the deepest challenge of Ascension Day: to trust that absence is not abandonment.

The disciples lose the physical presence of Jesus, but they gain something larger—the presence of Christ available to all people, in all places, through all generations.

And so the Church becomes his body in the world.

Not perfect.

Not always confident.

Sometimes worshipping and doubting at the same time.

But still called.

Still sent.

Still accompanied.

The cloud that takes Jesus from their sight is not a symbol of disappearance so much as divine mystery. The disciples can no longer cling to Jesus as they once did. They must now learn to find him differently.

And so must we.

We find him in Word and Sacrament.

In neighbour and stranger.

In service and suffering.

In beauty and justice.

In communities shaped by forgiveness.

In lives transformed by grace.

For the ascended Christ is not far away.

He is the one who fills all in all.

And because that is true, there is nowhere we can go where he is not already present, drawing the world toward the love of God