

The 7th Sunday of Easter-Ascension Sunday, May 17, 2026

St. Andrew's Church, Kitchener

Holy Communion/Eucharist, 8:00 a.m./10:00 a.m.

Revised Common Lectionary: **Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53**

Preacher: Gerry Mueller

Our 1st Lesson today from the *Acts of the Apostles* is about it, and our Gospel reading today, hints at it; **it** being the last and final act in our Lord's earthly ministry; his **Ascension** to be with God the Father.

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, always the Thursday 10 days before Pentecost, and thus (in North America) a day mostly ignored by all, except in very large churches and cathedrals. It is much more marked in continental Europe, where in many countries it is still a legal holiday, making church attendance possible, but also family activities like the traditional kite flying! Here, in the New World, we have mostly moved it to the following Sunday, today, and call it Ascension Sunday as well as the 7th Sunday of Easter.

So naturally, I'm going to talk about our Lord's Ascension and its meaning for us.

If you have visited the Church of the Holy Saviour in Waterloo, and closely examined their stained glass windows, you might have noticed that they mostly depict important events in the life and ministry of Jesus; his birth, the visitation in the Temple, some scenes from his healing ministry, the Transfiguration, his trial,

crucifixion, burial, and the resurrection. The major and final event that is missing from this glass summary of the Gospels is the Ascension. Instead, there is a kind of vanilla Christian symbol window at the very back on the pulpit side of the nave. I once asked the Rector of the 1980's, the late Gerald Churchill, about that.

As an answer he showed me the artist's drawing for the missing Ascension window. "Someone wanted to donate **this**, but I'm simply not having **that!**" he muttered. The proposed window showed Jesus going vertically into the sky, looking like he had rockets tied to his feet, while some startled and bemused disciples (actually just their heads) looked upward from the bottom frame of the window!

That rather bad design (and come to think of it, I'm not that crazy about most artistic representations of the Ascension, including ours in the very last stained glass panel on the pulpit side [and which, incidentally, is out sequence]) illustrates one of the main difficulties many Christians have with the Ascension of Jesus. "Just exactly **what** happened?" is our question.

We are not helped by the scriptural witness either. The Gospel of Mark has **two** known endings, or **maybe three** with the third lost, depending on which ancient manuscripts you accept. One has no mention of the Ascension, the second simply says that Jesus was

"taken up" into heaven. The Gospel of Matthew has **no** Ascension story. Luke's Gospel says that Jesus "withdrew from [the disciples] and was carried **up** into heaven." John does not seem to have **any** knowledge of an Ascension. And the passage from the Book of Acts which we heard earlier (and which it is **almost** universally agreed comes from the same author as the Gospel of Luke) simply says that Jesus was "lifted up, and a cloud took him from [the disciples'] sight." Clearly, the New Testament is not at all **clear** about exactly **how** the resurrected Jesus left this earth to go to his Father.

But we need to consider the **symbolism** involved. The 1st century, at least in the world of Judaism and early Christianity, had a universally accepted three story cosmology. (Hell below in the basement, so to speak; our earthly existence here, on the 1st floor; and heaven above, in a 2nd story just beyond the clouds, the sun, the moon and stars glued to the dome of a "firmament".) In that thought-system Jesus moving upwards to heaven made symbolic sense. However, as we understand cosmology today, clearly heaven is not in any particular direction from our plane of existence. But equally clearly, even today, if you are going to symbolize the resurrected Jesus going to the Father, then not just **any** direction will **do**. Down is not an option; neither is sideways. **Up** is the only choice you have, as a symbol of Christ going to the heaven from which he

came. And so, **unsatisfactory** as it is, up, **ascending**, is what we are stuck with as the symbol of our Lord returning to the heaven from which he came to earth. But the rocket feet need to go!

However, to worry too much about the **means** and **direction** of the Ascension is to miss the major **point** of the Ascension. It is to worry about the "**how?**", and to forget completely the "**why?**".

In one of my worst Church nightmares, the Ascension never happened! Just imagine **this** - instead of going to be with the Father, Jesus, **the eternal Christ**, sets up an **office** in Jerusalem, from which he is going to be available to the faithful of all times and places. Given what you know of any bureaucracy, just how many layers of major and minor officials do you think would be **between** you and Jesus by now? Given your understanding of how long and how much paperwork it takes for the church to make up its mind on any doctrine, how long do you think it would take for **anything** said or done by Jesus to reach **you**?

Let's look at the Ascension with those thoughts in mind. Jesus left this earth, where his presence was a matter of **fact**, to be with God, where his presence is a matter of **faith**. Jesus of Nazareth is a fact of **history**. A few people saw him with physical eyes; a few people heard him with physical ears. But as a **fact** of history,

Jesus of Nazareth was present only with those who could actually see or hear or touch him. Even in his own time the physical Jesus would have been **unknown** to essentially the **entire** population of the planet. As a physical presence, Jesus of Nazareth could only be absent from almost **everyone** alive in his time. And so it would be today, had Jesus **remained** on this earth.

But at the Ascension, Jesus of Nazareth moves from a **fact** of history to the **Christ** of faith. And, as the Christ of faith, Jesus **can** be present to **all** the faithful **always** and **everywhere**. So the Ascension is a story, not about Jesus going "up" **away** from us, but about Jesus being **given** to us for **all** times and **all** places.

In fact, Jesus was present with a few people in the first century. **In faith** Christ is present with each one of us all the time and in every place. You might **feel** his presence right **now!** He may be sitting with us here, closer to us than we are to each other. We have only to reach out, to touch **him**. When we are most **alone**, Jesus is most **with us**. When we feel most **lost**, Jesus can **find** us. When we feel most **powerless**, Jesus can **strengthen** us.

In fact, a few people heard **Jesus** say that he did not **condemn** them, but **forgave** them. **In faith**, all of us can **confess** our failures and shortcomings to **Christ**, and hear him tell us that we are not **condemned**, but **forgiven**.

In fact, Jesus told a few people to fear not, that he would be with them, and guide them. **In faith**, Christ can overcome **all** our fears. **In faith**, Christ can show **all of us** the way. **In faith**, he says to all of us, "Follow me, I am the way, trust in me, I will **not** abandon you!"

In fact, Jesus broke bread and shared wine with a few people in an Upper Room. **In faith**, Christ feeds all of us, and billions the world over, with his own body and blood. Only by Jesus being **absent** from **this** world, can Christ become **present**, in **faith**, in the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist.

The Ascension then is not a commemoration of Jesus **going away**. It is not about Jesus going from this world in some direction, by some mechanism. Ascension is not about **regretting or missing** someone absent. The Ascension is about Christ being present to and seen and heard by all who believe in him in faith, at **all times** and in **all places**. We do not **regret** the **going away** of Jesus, we **celebrate** the **presence** of Christ **in the world**. We are not holding a memorial service for someone who is **absent**, nor are we reflecting upon the **vacuum** created by his exit. No, we are having a party, in honour of the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ, who is **with us** until the end of the age.