

May 29, 2022

# Ascension Sunday

The Rev. Garrett Yates  
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church





I'm upset. And like you deeply bothered. Angry. Sad. And at a loss. And I've known all week that I'd preach on Uvalde but I've had no idea how it would work with the liturgical occasion of the feast of the Ascension. The Ascension, this little known feast day, is celebrated the week before Pentecost when Jesus leaves his disciples and tells them to wait, for in just a few days his Spirit would descend upon them. It's pretty awful timing. How much we'd rather Jesus stay here with us. Stay here on earth and minister to the wounds and the hurts of our nation; stay here and speak a comforting word to our communities. But he doesn't stay. He leaves. He ascends into heaven, where, as the creed tell us, he is seated at the right hand of the Father. It feels like bad timing. It's not the feast of Jesus' ascension into heaven but the feast of his abandonment of earth. What is the significance of Jesus leaving earth for us today?

There are two reasons you might hear, depending on which side of the theological (even political) aisle you hang out on. The first reason to celebrate the ascension is to celebrate the fact that Jesus has gone to heaven. Jesus wasn't just resurrected from the dead, and then left to wander the earth and drop in and out on his disciples. No, he returned to paradise. And in his return to heaven, we are reminded of what is most important for us to remember: heaven is real. There is another realm. A place we hope to arrive at when we die, where the faithful live. A world that is perfect, blissful, no more suffering, only happiness and joy. Jesus is the Heavenly emissary who reminds suffering humanity about heaven. This is good news.

And yet not for everyone. For many critics of religion, the belief in heaven has a way of relieving Christians of any responsibility to care for the earth; comparatively speaking, earth has very little value. This life, this world doesn't matter; we'll all be in heaven one day. Christians believing in the ascension are those people who feel like it's okay to abandon earth. Why try and make a difference in this world in my 80 or so years here when we are all going to live 100 billion in the next?

If you wanted to reject the emphasis on heaven, you could remind us that Jesus left earth to clear the way for us, in effect saying to us, "I did all that I could do on earth, now it's up to you." While the first view sees Jesus as a heavenly Lord, this view would

emphasize his earthly ambitions, ambitions to establish justice, strive for peace, lift up the outsider, and call down judgment on the powerful. To believe in this Jesus, you don't really have to have a settled belief about heaven and the afterlife. The Jesus of earth and ethics is the one that matters. Not Jesus the Heavenly Emissary but Earth's missionary for Justice. This is good news.

And yet not for everyone. If you don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah from above, then you are bound to believe the burden of messiahship falls on us. It's up to us to save the world and save the earth. But that doesn't quite work. People who are dead-set on being self-appointed messiahs tend to live between the extremes of enormous despair or egregious pride. And ultimately, in my experience, they become exhausted and bitter people.

Christians in America tend to split along these lines when considering the ascension of Jesus. Emphasizing either Heaven or Earth, Prayer or Politics. We offer our "thoughts and prayers" or we assume politics and law hold the power for change. The Christ of heaven and faith, or the Jesus of earth and ethics. But notice, both visions lack one thing: they lack a Jesus who is here. They lack a Jesus who makes any difference in the here and now. The first option – Team Heaven – says that Jesus isn't here but is in heaven, preparing a place for us. The second option – Team Earth – says that Jesus isn't here (typically he's just an inspiring figure of history) therefore we must get to work picking up where he left off. Both visions of Jesus operate from a sense of grief – it's the Feast of Earthly Abandonment. Escape to heaven or become the messiahs of earth. Cut off from any transcendent source, both end in despair of real healing happening here. Real transformation.

It's true that the iconography of the Church for the Feast of the Ascension always depicts Jesus leaving. Heading out of Earth's front door in the sky. And going into the by and by to be seated at the Father's right hand. And yet, the metaphor of God's right hand is actually an important theological phrase. Martin Luther, the great reformer, said that when the creed says he sat down at the right hand of the Father, it is merely saying that he entered into all times and all places. Jesus now lives in God's everywhere, we might say. Jesus isn't off somewhere else. He isn't buried in the earth, leaving human beings to their ethics. He isn't retreating to Heaven, leaving human beings to their thoughts and prayers.

He is alive, present in the here and now and everywhere of God. How can we find the one who is everywhere?

If you type “icons of the Ascension” into Google you’ll likely see a bunch of images of Jesus’ feet at the top of the portrait, dangling almost like a chandelier over his followers. The feet bear the wounds of the cross. The wounded feet, the light for the followers. Jesus didn’t ascend to the Father without blemish, without scar; he ascended with his wounds. If you want to know where Jesus is, look for the wounds of earth, for the wounds of flesh. There are no wounds of flesh where Jesus is not already present. When we see suffering and tragedy and evil, we remember that Jesus is not off in Heaven. He hasn’t retreated behind the Gates of Paradise. Jesus is there. As the prayer from Compline reminds us: keeping watch with those who work or watch or weep; present, giving angels charge over those who sleep; present, tending the sick, giving rest to weary; holding the hand of the dying as he blesses them; there: soothing the suffering, pitying the afflicted, and wherever there is joy, shielding that with his love. The Ascension of the Wounded Christ shows us that there are no present Wounds where he is not present. There are no wounds that are alone.

There is no part of earth that is alone, cut off from him. And there is no earthly power that he isn’t present to. Jesus didn’t just come to earth to suffer, to be wounded. Jesus isn’t just the suffering Messiah. He is the meddling Messiah too. Jesus isn’t just present to the wounded. He is present to the powers that perpetuate these wounds. The Ascended One is present to places of power. Remember, in his time on Earth, Jesus didn’t boycott the temple; he didn’t boycott the money changers, keeping at a distance from corruption. He entered the temple; he overturned the money changers.

Jesus is alive in God’s everywhere, present in the places of power. Jesus is present in Uvalde, and Jesus is present in Washington. Where is Jesus? We know that Jesus is everywhere a politician is reconsidering their position; everywhere one of them dares to choose reality over money and voter constituency. Jesus is the pressure, the conviction of the truth provoking the conscience. Jesus is alive, and his followers – that’s us – are called to join Jesus and tell the earthly powers they are not alone, and we are here to raise our voices until something in this country

changes.

Jesus is alive and present, not in the past tense of history, not the future tense of Heaven, but here in the present tense. Which means that he is here in this room. The Jesus who has ascended into God's everywhere is alive here, not just present for the wounded and for those perpetuating wounds. He is here for us. Alive in this space. The ascension, Jesus' transposition into God's everywhere, is about one word: victory. When, in the Creed, we say that Jesus ascended into Heaven, we are saying that the wounded love of Jesus will win. It is a bolder claim than that. We say that he *ascended* (past tense). We say that the wounded love of Jesus has won.

I know there is reason for doubt, and hopelessness seems like a totally rational response to what has happened. People in power actually having a change of heart – no way. Don't neglect those thoughts and those feelings; when they come on strong, remember this little line in the Creed we are lifting up this morning: love (not hate) has ascended into Heaven. Love (not despair) reigns.

When we say that Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father, we are saying that there is no place where Jesus is not. He is alive. He is in the present tense. Now, the New Testament is really trippy when it comes to time. It will say things like, "Jesus died on the cross before the foundation of the world." Jesus, who was crucified by the Romans in the year 30 AD, actually died before the world began. That's what it says in the book of Revelation, implying that the cross wasn't something the Romans imposed. The cross was always something God intended to conquer with love. The cross in Rome's day, the gun in ours, is what God has conquered.

The violence of the world shall be overcome by the love of God: friends let us work for justice and peace and speak out against greed and idolatry. Let's give our energy and our time to showing Jesus as the Present One. May we get swept up in the Love that weeps, that meddles, that prays, that provokes, that acts, that works, that speaks up, that consoles – doing it not in anxiety but hope; not from despair but courage; not from a weak spirit, but from a humble confidence of love's victory already achieved. We don't have to choose between praying and working for change. The Ascension invites us into a question like

this: Present Jesus, how can I follow you in the present moment and participate in your mission to disarm our world of all but love? Inspire us to participate in the victory of your love, now.

