

# **THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST**

## **MAY 21, 2023**



**ST. JOHN**

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### **\*RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

ONE: In awe and wonder, we lift our eyes to the heavens. We raise our songs of joy to the Ruler of all time and space.

**MANY:** Sing praises to God, sing praises; Shout to God with loud songs of joy.

ONE: We gather to remember the One who shared our common lot. Jesus Christ, who visited this earth, dwells in heaven.

**MANY:** We celebrate the life and ministry of Jesus. We rejoice in the hope to which Christ has called us.

ONE: We open ourselves to baptism with the Holy Spirit. We expect to be empowered as witnesses in today's world.

**MANY:** We seek a spirit of wisdom and revelation. We are here to be filled with power from on high.

**\*PRAYER OF INVOCATION:** As Christ ascended to heaven, our spirits are lifted to you this day, O God. Our Spirit fills all the universe. We dwell within your embrace and cannot escape from your watchful care. You are with us here, choosing us as apostles and instructing us in the way we should go. Focus our limited understanding on the person of Jesus, that all he did and taught might come alive in us during this hour. Grant to us convincing proof of your promises

as we welcome your winds of change in our lives.  
Amen.

**\*CALL TO CONFESSION:**

On this day of mystery and wonder, we reflect on our record as an Easter people. Is there evidence that Christ is alive within us and among us? Is the work of the Spirit obvious to any who observe our words and deeds? Let us admit how things are with us, as we seek God's forgiveness.

**\*UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION:**

**Hear us, God, our hope, for we have too easily denied our heritage amid the competing claims all around us. We declare ownership of what is only lent to us for a time. We strive for knowledge and control beyond our capacity, wanting power on our own terms rather than through the unpredictable empowerment of your Spirit. Sometimes we stand on tiptoe to view what is out of sight, then arrogantly conclude that there is nothing to see. O God, open our eyes and our hearts that we might be forgiven and find true life in you. Amen.** Silence

**\*ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:** Repentance and forgiveness of sin are proclaimed to all people in the

name of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness is God's gift to us, one we can never earn but we are welcome to accept. When we agree to God's freeing offer, we are also agreeing to let God's love change in us. We are blessed by this opportunity for newness of life.

**SECOND TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE: Acts 1:1-11**

**The risen Jesus with his disciples**

"<sup>1</sup>Theophilus, the first scroll I wrote concerned everything Jesus did and taught from the beginning, <sup>2</sup>right up to the day when he was taken up into heaven. Before he was taken up, working in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus instructed the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering, he showed them that he was alive with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days, speaking to them about God's kingdom. <sup>4</sup>While they were eating together, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, "This is what you heard from me: <sup>5</sup>John baptized with water, but in only a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."  
<sup>6</sup>As a result, those who had gathered together asked Jesus, "Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?"

<sup>7</sup> Jesus replied, “It isn’t for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

<sup>9</sup> After Jesus said these things, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup> While he was going away and as they were staring toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood next to them. <sup>11</sup> They said, “Galileans, why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven.”

### **EPISTLE READING: Ephesians 1:15-23**

#### **Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians**

<sup>15</sup> Since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, this is the reason that <sup>16</sup> I don’t stop giving thanks to God for you when I remember you in my prayers. <sup>17</sup> I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you. <sup>18</sup> 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, <sup>19</sup> and what is the overwhelming greatness of God’s power that is working among us believers. This power is conferred by the energy of God’s powerful strength. <sup>20</sup> God’s power was at work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and sat him at God’s right side in the heavens, <sup>21</sup> far above every ruler and authority and power and angelic power, any power that might be named not only now but in the future. <sup>22</sup> God put everything under Christ’s feet and made him head of everything in the church, <sup>23</sup> which is his body. His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ, who fills everything in every way.”

### **\*GOSPEL LESSON: Luke 24:44-53**

<sup>44</sup> Jesus said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. <sup>46</sup> He said to them, “This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached

in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup> Look, I'm sending to you what my Father promised, but you are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power."

### **Ascension of Jesus**

<sup>50</sup> He led them out as far as Bethany, where he lifted his hands and blessed them. <sup>51</sup> As he blessed them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. <sup>52</sup> They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem overwhelmed with joy. <sup>53</sup> And they were continuously in the temple praising God.

**These are the ancient words revealed to us anew.**

Thanks be to God. Amen.

### **MESSAGE: "What does it mean?"**

The words of William Barclay, "The ascension must always remain a mystery, for it attempts to put into words what is beyond words and to describe what is beyond description."

However, it was important for something like this to happen. I'll stop here and ask you, how do you think Jesus should leave the disciples? Just disappear or "move on"? He already died once, so it wouldn't look good if he were to do that again; maybe this

time, not be resurrected. Should Jesus just walk into the sunset, like cowboys in old movies? Any ideas? I mean it was unthinkable that the appearances of Jesus should grow fewer and fewer until finally they would just lose steam and fade away. That would have effectively wrecked the disciples' faith, don't you think. Didn't they deserve something more dramatic?

Sometimes, after we've watched enough movies, we can figure out how the story will end. But that is determined by how the story began. So, let's go back to the beginning.

Even though Jesus came to earth as a baby in an ordinary way, he was not an ordinary person. Our bodies are earthly only; Jesus' body was at home in both earth and heaven. Jesus always was connected to two dimensions, earth and heaven. Jesus would appear and disappear at will; for example, when he appeared to the disciples walking on the lake. When he could read the minds of others. When at the age of 12 he was teaching the rabbis in the temple.

At the end of the book of Revelation, heaven and earth will finally be joined together into one with the resurrection of Jesus. There won't be any more shuttling to and fro; the two dimensions will be fused

together at last. If our mental pictures of “heaven” need adjusting to allow for this startling possibility, so be it. Only this explains the otherwise very puzzling stories, here and in John’s similar account.

Of course, the resurrection and the ascension stretch our minds and imagination further than we normally like. We who live, even as Christians, with our thinking conditioned by the world of sin and death, find it a huge struggle to adjust to God’s new world. That is part of the challenge of the gospel. But if our minds are still reeling from trying to take all this in – and it seems, not surprisingly, as though that’s how the disciples were too – then what Jesus has to say in his last days with them is very practical and points the way to the whole mission of the church.

When Jesus ascended back to his father, we realized that there had to come a day when the Jesus of earth finally became the Christ of heaven. But to the disciples the ascension was obviously three things.

It was an ending. The days when the faith of the disciples was faith in a flesh-and-blood person and depended on Jesus’ flesh-and-blood presence were over. Now they were linked to someone who was

forever independent of space and time. Secondly, it was a beginning. The disciples did not leave the scene heartbroken; they left it with great joy, because now they knew that they had a Master from whom nothing could separate them anymore.

As the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:38-39, “I am sure that nothing – nothing in life or death – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Lastly, the ascension gave the disciples the certainty that they had a friend, not only on earth, but in heaven. Surely it is the most precious thing of all to know that in heaven there awaits us that self-same Jesus who on earth was wondrously kind. To die is not to go out into the dark; it is to go to him.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

#### **PASTORAL PRAYER:**

O Holy One, right now we stop in our busy lives, just to give you praise and gratitude for all you have given us. Where would we be without your love for us? We are especially thankful for your Son that you sent to us so that we might be closer to you. Jesus is a true friend to all of us.

Dearest friend, Jesus, please send your love and grace to all those in power in our country. May they serve you and the people; not their own ambitions.

Friend Jesus, please send your peace to all people who are in harms way; all people who are hungry and thirsty; all those who live in poverty finding it difficult to feed their families; all those who have to rebuild their lives after disasters; all those who are lonely; all those who are grieving; all those who are ill physically and mentally. And dear Son of God, send helpers to each one of these people that they might have a reason to celebrate your care for them.

Thank you, Holy Friend, for sending us your prayer so we might pray it in community, together in your love . . .

**THE LORD'S PRAYER:**

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

**OFFERTORY INVITATION:** Our giving expresses our faith in Jesus Christ and our love for all the saints. In

the church, we depend on our prayers for one another and the generosity of our support for the programs that help us all to grow in wisdom and capacity to serve.

**\*DOXOLOGY:**

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise God, all creatures here below;  
Praise God above you heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.**

**\*UNISON OFFERTORY PRAYER:**

**May our offerings express our care for one another and our commitment to serve the world in the name of Christ. Help us to use well all the resources you entrust to us. Equip us, as forgiven and forgiving people, to carry the good news to people we meet every day as well as the unknown sisters and brothers who live in desperate circumstances we can scarcely imagine. May our gifts and our lives praise you. Amen.**

**\*RESPONSIVE COMMISSION AND BLESSING:**

**ONE:** The risen Jesus appeared to friends in many ways. Christ is seen by persons today in people like us.

**MANY:** The life and teachings of Jesus point us to

**God's reign. God promises to empower our witness.**

ONE: We will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. This is the promise Jesus made to us.

**MANY: Through revelation, we will know more of Christ. Through the work God gives us, we will grow.**

ONE: Our worship sends us out to work and witness. We scatter to continue our worship through service.

**ALL: God sends us out with love for all the saints. We commit ourselves to care for all God's children. Amen. Amen.**

**PRAYER LIST:**

**AN INVITATION:**

**If you are free next Tuesday May 23, we are gathering at 11 am at Longhorn Steak House in Fairview Heights for Food and Fellowship. Join us.**