

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA**

May 29, 2022 – ASCENSION SUNDAY (YR. C)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Jesus Has Not Gone Away*”\*

Acts 1:1-11	(The risen Christ ascends into heaven)
Psalms 47	(God has gone up with a shout)
Ephesians 1:15-23	(God's resurrection power was at work in Christ)
St. Luke 24:44-53	(Jesus blesses His disciples as He ascends into heaven)

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As the Church Year moves on, we now come to the Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord, when we commemorate the final day of Christ's physical presence on earth.

The conclusion of Jesus' earthly ministry is not merely an ending—rather, it marks the fulfillment of God's entire plan of salvation for the whole world, starting from the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary when Jesus was conceived, through His birth, and all the miraculous and redemptive works of Jesus' life on earth that the Gospel writers have recorded for us. In the dynamics of Christ's life, we see God's plan at work:

Christ came down from Heaven in order to destroy the power of the devil over humankind.

Christ was crucified and rose from the dead in order to destroy death.

Christ ascends into Heaven in order to raise up into God's presence forever our human nature that was captive to sin, but is now redeemed.<sup>1</sup>

But notice: All of Christ's victories—over the devil, death, and sin—were accomplished in total humility. At Jesus' birth there was no media coverage, no fanfare or trumpeting in the streets of Bethlehem. It all happened in obscurity, lowliness, and poverty, as the newborn Savior of the World was placed in a feeding trough alongside oxen and donkeys.

At Christ's Crucifixion, there was no publicity, either. Not even the crowd who had condemned Him stayed to whip up a frenzy. On the contrary, He was attended only by criminals, shame, reviling, and a lonely, agonizing death.

Even His disciples were absent, with the exception of St. John, and the women who followed Jesus, including His mother. At Christ's Resurrection, where choirs of angels should have been singing “Glory to God!” as they did at His birth, no one heard or saw anything.

Even the women who first witnessed the empty tomb were not believed by those to whom they told the amazing news. In the weeks after Jesus' rising from the dead, when a groundswell of support and excitement could have been expected, only a handful of people believed that He had truly risen.

Likewise, at Our Lord's Ascension, the lone witnesses were His Mother and the remaining eleven disciples, in an obscure olive grove on a barren hillside overlooking Jerusalem. One could imagine that Jesus' enemies might have come to see Him off, gleefully shouting “good riddance!”

But only angels showed up, and they didn't make much of a fuss. In St. Matthew's account of the Ascension, he casually mentions that even some of Jesus' disciples *still* doubted He was truly risen!

And so, we see that throughout the life of Christ, every extraordinary event happened in, and was surrounded by, humility—and often, by rejection and doubt. So, it is Jesus who models for us that in the Christian life, victory is only achieved through denying ourselves, humbling ourselves before God, and giving everything into God's hands, not caring what others think of us, even as Jesus did.

And, as we continue to grow in this surrendered life, every act of humility will bring yet another triumph over Satan and the stubborn pride and corrupt cravings with which he tempts us.

Inasmuch as it is the deep desire and aim of every believer to become more and more like Christ, our Lord wants to grant us the opportunity and means to do this. Thus, in the final moments of His physical presence among us, Jesus provides us with two gifts to help us along the way:

First, He comforts both His disciples and us with the promise of the Holy Spirit, to be given to them at Pentecost. It is He who will guide them—and us—into all truth. And when we know and believe the truth that Jesus teaches—for example, His Sermon on the Mount—we will learn how to be more humble.

Second, through His holy angels, Christ reminds us that just as He ascended into Heaven, He will one day return from there, with those angels, in a cloud of glory. It is then that He shall judge the living and the dead, and absolute justice will finally be meted out: The righteous at last will be vindicated and those who are evil will be forever punished.

In the meantime, writes Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, “Jesus hasn’t just gone away. He has gone deeper into the heart of reality—our reality and God’s. He has become far more than a visible friend and companion; he has shown himself to be the very centre of our life, the source of our loving energy in the world and the source of our prayerful, trustful waiting on God.”

And, the Archbishop continues, until Jesus returns, we who consider ourselves friends of Jesus are called to offer ourselves “as signs of God in the world—to live in such a way that the underlying all-pervading energy of God begins to come through [us] and make a difference.”<sup>2</sup>

When people ask us where could God possibly be in this troubled world, our answer must be how we ourselves think, act, and pray. The way in which we visibly live our lives must bring Jesus to life in us, so that others may see and know Him. We can only do this by turning again and again to that deep well of trust and guidance which the Holy Spirit opens for us, made possible by Jesus’ departure from earth.

And this is how we know that Jesus is not gone. He is only temporarily out of sight. For Christ promises that He has not actually departed from us, saying in Matthew 28:20 “I am with you always.” And in Romans 8:39, St. Paul assures us that nothing “in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Therefore, may we eagerly anticipate a fresh infilling of His Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, which is next Sunday, and always seek to be worthy of Christ’s appearing by living lives of righteousness, humility, and surrender, which show Jesus to those around us, until He comes again.

*Amen.*

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\* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 9 May 2013, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Andrew Phillips, “On Ascension Day,” © 2001 – 2013, [Orthodox England on the ‘Net](http://orthodoxengland.org.uk/sermascn.htm) <<http://orthodoxengland.org.uk/sermascn.htm>> 7 May 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, “Sermon for Ascension Day 2011,” 2 June 2011, [ArchbishopofCanterbury.org](http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2053/) <<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2053/>> 7 May 2013.