

## Ascension Witness

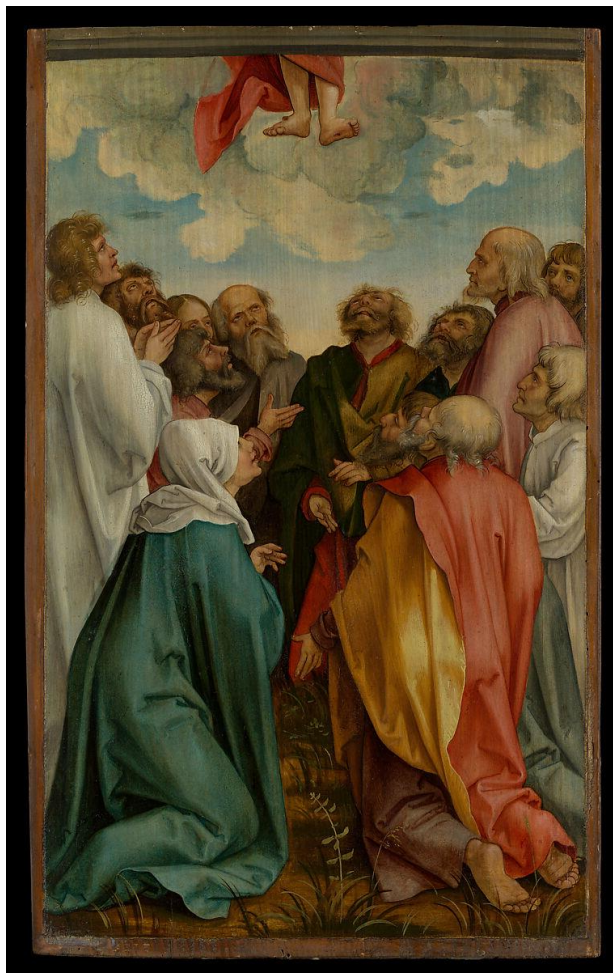
Sermon preached on May 17, 2026

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Nina R. Pooley

Today we celebrate Christ's ascension into heaven - transferring that celebration from this past Thursday. After spending 40 days living with the community of disciples, the Risen Jesus goes home to God.

One of the strangest depictions of the ascension is currently on display at the Met - it's by Hans Suess von Kulmbach. ([The Ascension of Christ](#)) His composition was adapted from a woodcut by his teacher, Albrecht Dürer, so they share the dubious honor of creating this image. The artists have emphasized the ascension of Christ into heaven by depicting him as leaving the pictorial space. Only Christ's feet and lower legs are visible at the top of the painting, while on the ground, we see the group of disciples and the Virgin Mary looking up at feet dangling above them, as Christ leaves the frame.



I know that the artists are trying to portray this powerful moment, but I've always had a problem with the image. Not only does it come across as rather silly, but it points us in the wrong direction. Yes, Jesus ascends to God, fair enough - but consider where Jesus wants our attention to be. Not on his ascending, but on all that is about to happen on the ground. He says to his disciples:

"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 ends of the earth."<sup>1</sup>

If we're to understand the ascension we need to pay attention to the movement in this moment - **all** of the movement. Jesus ascends to heaven, but the action he draws our attention to is here on earth. He points us to the movement of the Spirit, which will move toward the disciples, and outward to the ends of the earth.

"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 ends of the earth."<sup>2</sup>

I once heard our retired Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, preach a 45-minute sermon on this one verse. It's the foundation of the Jesus Movement - that we will move out into the world - to the ends of the earth as witnesses of Jesus. The point of the ascension isn't where Jesus went, but what we're called to do in response - to move outward for the love of the world.

My friend, theologian, and priest The Rev. Dr. Andrew Thayer puts it this way:

the deeper movement of the story is not vertical transportation.  
It is vocational redirection. Jesus goes up. The disciples go out.<sup>3</sup>

I spent several days last week attending our diocesan clergy conference. It was a chance for us to spend time together, to get to know our new Bishop, and to talk about the challenges of being ministers of the Gospel.

One of the concerns clergy raised is preaching in the current political landscape. In a time of division and polarization, when partisan politics have freighted every word, it's tempting to steer clear of anything controversial. But it's impossible to preach the Gospel without sounding political, because the Gospel is political.

As Rev. Dr. Thayer explains:<sup>4</sup>

Politics, in its broadest sense, concerns the ordering of human life together: power, law, labor, violence, institutions, hierarchy, and belonging— and the Bible has a great deal to say about these things. So did Jesus. So do the Gospels. They speak constantly about debts and hunger, land and status, prisoners and widows, exclusion and mercy.

Friends, Jesus' earthly ministry is absolutely political. Jesus heals and feeds and liberates, **and** he challenges systems of oppression, systems that create the suffering, systems that allow people to be hungry when there is more than enough food, systems that allow widows and orphans to be destitute, systems that imprison and oppress, alienate and exclude.

We know that that Jesus challenged the systems and powers of his time - it's evidenced by his crucifixion. He isn't crucified for healing or teaching, or feeding those who are hungry. Empires as large and powerful as the Roman Empire can tolerate a local healer, even a small-time miracle worker who does nice things for people. But oppressive regimes can't tolerate prophets who challenge the systems of oppression and domination. Jesus is crucified because he is a credible threat to the institutions of power.

When we are called to be witnesses to Christ to the ends of the earth, that call is to more than individual piety or neighborliness. It's more than just telling people about Jesus, or even being loving. To witness to Christ - is to live in a way that makes clear **that another kind of world is possible**. Another way of **life** is possible, one that is just and abundant for all people - here on earth. Not just in heaven.

Our guest theologian, Rev. Dr. Thayer puts it this way:<sup>5</sup>

The church keeps trying to escape history while the Spirit keeps sending it back into it. This does not mean Christianity can be reduced to activism. The gospel is not merely a political program with stained-glass windows. Christianity concerns prayer, forgiveness, worship, beauty, contemplation, transcendence, and eternal life. But the New Testament refuses to separate these realities from embodied human existence.

“Thy kingdom come” is not merely about heaven after death. It is about organizing human life now. [The Book of] Acts is not the story of a religious community retreating from history. It is the story of a Spirit-driven people becoming more entangled with history than ever before.

Which brings us back to our text this morning. Once the disciples stop staring at the sky, they go back to Jerusalem. They go back to the world, to the city where Jesus was crucified, where they are afraid of being persecuted. Where there is oppression and suffering, and struggle. And there, before the promised advocate arrives, they gather together to pray, and to prepare themselves to be active witnesses to all that Jesus taught them - to the ends of the earth.

Rev. Dr. Thayer describes it:<sup>6</sup>

The movement of the gospel after Ascension is not away from earth but deeper into it. Not withdrawal from human struggle but immersion within it. The angels interrupt the disciples' upward gaze because the church cannot spend its life looking toward heaven

while human beings are being crushed below. The Spirit is always pulling the church back into history: into systems and structures, into neighborhoods and nations, into the long unfinished work of learning what love looks like when it is practiced in public.

Friends, what does that look like for us? Rather than being focused on Jesus' ascending (and staring at his feet dangling above us!) the Ascension focuses us on the ground around us. Walking in the ways of Jesus always moves us outward - toward the people in need of God's love.

While we were in clergy conference this past week, Jenny, Margot, and I were stunned to get a Signal notification about the ICE arrest of a young man in the Burger King parking lot. As we were processing that together, we noted the forum on Thursday discussing better approaches to assist those experiencing mental health issues without involving the police; and the importance of Saturday's rent control rally. That's just Wednesday to Saturday in Pittsfield.

Beloved, obviously, there's a lot of witnessing to be done right here, in our community, with and on behalf of the oppressed and vulnerable in our midst.

Deep breath.

On this week when we recall the days between Ascension and Pentecost - like the disciples, we gather, and we pray. And we prepare ourselves to go into the world, for the love of the world, together. Jesus said, "And you will be my witnesses - to the ends of the earth." Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:8

<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:8

<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Dr. Andrew Thayer, "Up, Up and Away?," Lectionary Reflection for Ascension Sunday, May 17, 2026, Andrew Thayer Studio, posted May 13, 2026

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