

Ascension, Year C

- “lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.”
- Of the seven principal feasts of the Church, I’d say that today, the Feast of the Ascension, is probably one of the most difficult ones for us to wrap our heads around
- The others are either fairly straightforward for us (like Christmas and Easter), or at the very least always fall on Sundays, so we get plenty of chances to hone our understandings (like Pentecost and Trinity Sunday), and even the other holidays that fall on fixed dates at least sometimes fall on Sunday, or have a history of being celebrated on Sunday (like Epiphany and All Saints’) so we have a good bit of experience with them
- But that’s not always so today, with this feast of the Ascension – this feast day that always falls on a Thursday, 40 days after Easter and 10 days before Pentecost
- Ascension is, I dare say, the holiest day that we don’t have a good grasp on in our calendar
- And part of that is because we aren’t quite sure what to make of the Ascension
- What are we to make of the fact that Jesus basically levitates up off the ground and into the clouds?
- This is a favorite image among artists, incidentally, because it’s so unmistakable, though I have to say that my absolute favorite is by the painter and printmaker Albrecht Durer, whose portrayal of the assumption I find rather hilarious
- In it, the disciples are gathered around a mound of earth, which is front and center in the picture, and has two footprints in it, as if Jesus had only just been standing there
- And at the top of the frame, as if just about to drift out of it, are the feet of Jesus, dangling above the heads of everyone present
- The first time I saw it, I have to be honest, I laughed at loud, and I think that speaks to how infrequently I, at least, had given serious thought to this story
- Because that’s what happens!
- Jesus is lifted up, we’re told, and then hidden in a cloud
- We hardly ever think about this image of Jesus, because I think it’s hard for us to think of what it means
- You might remember that Luke and Acts were essentially two halves of the same whole – both written by the same author, intended as part of the same book
- Even meant to be read as a unit
- But the readings we just heard included one from Acts, and one from Luke – and both

passages tell the same story, the story of Jesus ascending

- That's right; it's the story so nice, Luke told it twice
- Once at the end of his Gospel, and once to open the book of Acts – if you read them as intended, one after the other, you'd read the story of the ascension – followed quickly by the story of the ascension
- So why did Luke do that?
- One answer is found in some older church calendars, when this feast day would begin a ten-day season called Ascensiontide – you'll still see some churches observe this season – and the simplest way of observing it is by removing the Paschal candle from the sanctuary
- That's this large candle, kept here at Grace in our sanctuary for all 50 days of Eastertide and thereafter brought out again on occasions when we want to remind ourselves of Christ's death and resurrection, particularly at Baptisms and burials
- But for those churches that remove it, it makes a different statement – a statement that for these 10 days, the disciples were in a wilderness of a sort – they hadn't yet received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but Christ had ascended to heaven
- Meaning, what they were left thinking about, more than anything, was about Christ's seeming absence – the thought that Christ had left this earth, and it wasn't obvious to them when he might be coming back
- That's an important aspect of our Christian experience to name, isn't it?
- There are times where we feel as though God is absent – there are times where it feels like God has withdrawn from the world and left us to our own devices
- That's not a good feeling, it isn't a happy feeling, but it's one we sometimes need to recognize
- I'm sure it's a feeling that a number of people here in town have had in the past week since the tornado hit, and they've had to grapple with the fact that their homes and belongings were blown away or ripped apart
- Or a feeling that some of us have had, knowing that we were mostly spared from the worst of the damage, while the storm seemed to strike hardest in those neighborhoods least equipped to recover from such catastrophe
- Times of wondering “where was God in the midst of all of this?” are not foreign to Scripture, not foreign to the experience of Jesus and of the disciples, and I think that's a really big deal
- Even when we're wondering, “Where is God?”, God is right there with us, in the wondering

- But it's also good to remember that, both times the story is told, it isn't as though Jesus simply disappears without warning or explanation or context
- In Luke's Gospel, Jesus ascends **while** he's blessing them – he is proclaiming God's blessing on them even as he's disappearing from sight, letting them know that this, too, is part of God's blessing upon them and upon the world
- And when the story is told again in Acts, Jesus promises that they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit “not many days from now” – “you will receive power,” he says, “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.”
- The Holy Spirit is coming, the animating and empowering Spirit that will enable us to do more than we can ever imagine, that will knit us together as the Body of Christ for the world, and enable us to share the Good News with everyone who needs to hear it
- By ascending into heaven, Jesus takes his place as the rightful ruler of all creation – we know that since Christ rules at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, that no other powers or principalities of this world can claim our allegiance or their own sovereignty – because he ascends, we know that Christ is head over all
- And because he is lifted bodily into heaven and sends the Holy Spirit to unite us to him, we are assured that we can follow in his footsteps – the footsteps on that Albrecht Durer print
- Those gloriously, even comically vacant footsteps remind us that the end for which we are intended is not down here, where even if for only ten days it can seem like God is absent
- But we were made instead to dwell with God in Christ, on high, up above, ascended