

Devotional Worship for the Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord

Following the biblical accounts in Mark, Luke, and Acts, the whole church celebrates the feast of the ascension of Jesus to heaven on the fortieth day of after the feast of the Resurrection. Ascension Day could be explained as the cynical “I’m outta here” of a God weary of us, but that explanation would be short-sighted because it leaves out the important stop on the cross toward a resurrected life. Instead, Jesus’ departure is accompanied with the promise of the Spirit’s presence remaining among us. We look up to the skies, then return our gaze to those among us in need of our care, to the body of Christ, and the wind of the Spirit to enliven faith and invigorate our mission of love. God is here,¹ always, in all creation, in each person, and in our own breath.

Prayer

Almighty God, your blessed Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things. Mercifully give us faith to trust that, as he promised, Christ abides with us through all time, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

(adapted from seventh century Gelasian Sacramentary)

Bible Readings

Acts 1:1-11

Angelic figures tell the apostles not to look up toward heaven, yet this has sometimes become the content of this Thursday’s worship. Rather, Acts calls us to receive the Holy Spirit and live as Christ’s witnesses throughout the whole world.

Ephesians 1:15-23

The prayer presents several images useful for Ascension Day: God’s power is at work in Christ; Christ rules over all things; Christ’s name is revered above all others; Christ’s body as it were extends from the heavens to the earth—a kind of pillar of the universe; Christ fills all things.

Luke 24:44-53

The ascension of Christ to God is another way that Luke described the resurrection. From Christ’s death and resurrection come forgiveness of sins and the power of the Holy Spirit. Since we no longer believe that God lives up in the sky, two fourth-century ways that theologians have spoken of the ascension are particularly helpful: Christ rose from death to fill the cosmos, and Christ ascended into the eucharist. Martin Luther spoke of Christ is in the bread, in the community, in creation, indeed, in all things.

Homily

That Jesus ascended into heaven 40 days after his resurrection is a fundamental Christian belief—so much so that we include it in our creeds. The response of his disciples to this extraordinary action was not one of shock, nor of dismay that he had again been taken from

them. Instead, the disciples returned “to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God” (Luke 24:52-53).

The gospels tell us that for three years Jesus’ disciples misunderstood his parables, misinterpreted his actions, and just plain missed the point of his public ministry. In a transformative moment just before his ascension, however, Jesus “opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:45). It might have been the most significant “light-bulb moment” in history. Over and over, Jesus had tried to convey his purpose to his disciples; now it became clearer to them. Exhilarating as this enlightenment must have been, it also came with profound responsibilities. Since Jesus’ time on earth was over, it was now the disciples’ time. With Jesus no longer physically present to preach and to teach, to perform miracles, to heal, and to show compassion, all these responsibilities fell to those who followed him.

And yet this overwhelming task now seemed manageable to these once-bumbling disciples because Jesus provided them with the understanding they needed. That understanding is available to each of us as well. Baptized into the body of Christ, we have all that we need to proclaim Jesus’ message. No wonder the disciples were joyous as they returned to Jerusalem. We can be, too. As spiritual descendants of those first students, we have the extraordinary privilege of showing and telling the world about the invitation of the Son of God. Whenever we view another person with love and compassion, witnessing Christ in them, we are proclaiming the great good news of unconditional love. Sometimes that witness means speaking to the powerful. What a gift we have been given, that Jesus has entrusted us with his gospel to share—to really SHARE!

Hymn

The Ascension Day hymn “Alleluia! Sing to Jesus” is a text by William Dix (1837-1898) and the tune Hyfrydol by Rowland Prichard (1811-1887). The setting of this hymn is arranged by Robert Hobby, who currently serves as music director at Trinity English Lutheran (ELCA), Fort Wayne, Indiana. This hymn setting was composed by Bob as a commission for the 2015 visit of Pope Francis to the USA, and was sung during the Celebration of Mass at Madison Square Garden. Here is a recording from First Plymouth Church in Lincoln, Nebraska in 2015, with Tom Trenney, music director, at the organ, and Jeremy Bankson, conductor, who is now music director at Prince of Peace Lutheran (ELCA) in Dublin, Ohio. The text of this hymn is in the video, so you can sing along.

Click at the following link to listen and sing:

<https://youtu.be/rl-nTyoiHmU?si=JrvqZuoFJhJa1ucl>

Prayers of Intercession

Uplifted by the promised hope of healing and resurrection, we join in prayer with the people of God in all times and places.

Living God, you chose us to be your witnesses. We pray for the church in every place and the congregations in our community. Focus our hearts, minds, and actions on the ministry we share in your name.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, all creation sings praise to you. You delight in the oceans and the mountains are your throne. Teach us humility, respect, and sacrifice for our home.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Sovereign God, you rule the heavens, the earth, and time itself. Make this a time of justice, peace, and solidarity among all peoples, so that oppression and violence rule no more.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Tender God, we wait with hope for your presence to heal us, bless us, restore us, and give us peace. You know all the names of those suffering and those in any fear for whom we pray this day.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Gentle God, you guide us as we seek wisdom. We pray for teachers, day care workers, professors, lawyers, theologians, judges, landlords, civil officers, care givers - and all those charged with guiding and protecting the young and old. Give them endurance and persistence in their valuable work.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Infinite God, your inheritance given to all your saints is your presence in our life and in our death. We remember all those near death, and all who have died. May they have rest in you.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Surprising God, you bring us joy in unexpected ways. Teach us to love you, ourselves, and one another more and more. Bless graduates, expecting families, new relationships, and renewed cooperation among enemies. May our lives be expressions of gratitude and hope.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

With bold confidence in your love, we place all our prayers into the fullness of your eternal care; through the risen and ascended Christ, who is alive in us and in all creation, now and forever. Amen.

Blessing

Lord, beyond our mortal sight,
raise our hearts to reach thy height,
there thy face unclouded see,
find our heaven of heavens in thee. Alleluia! Amen.

(from Charles Wesley (1707-1788))

