

Ascension

[Reading I: Acts 1:1-11](#)

[Responsorial Psalm: 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9](#)

[Reading II: Ephesians 1:17-23](#)

[Gospel: Matthew 28:16-20](#)

Readings may be found on the US Bishop's website:

<https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/052123-Ascension.cfm>



Giotto, The Ascension of Our Lord

Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy, 1305

In celebrating the Ascension of the Lord, our texts move from the pattern in the Easter season flow to ones for the solemnity with readings from the Acts of the Apostles, the Letter to the Ephesians, and the Gospel of Matthew.

The passage from Acts and the Gospel selection both describe the Ascension of Jesus, although in two different locations. Acts continues from the end of Luke's Gospel with a description of what lies before the Apostles. (Matthew presents the Apostles in Galilee and Luke's Gospel presents it as Bethany, just outside Jerusalem.)

Forty days is a richly symbolic number. With Noah, the rain came for 40 days and nights; Moses spent 40 days on the mountain with God; Elijah walked 40 days to the mountain of God; and Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the desert. Numbers in the Semitic tradition are more than just numbers. They have meaning and value beyond themselves. Forty is the fullness of time. It refers to God's time. Whatever time is needed for God to bring about God's plan, it is 40. So in the fulfillment of God's plan, Jesus was no longer seen by the early Christian community.

They are to wait for the "promise of the Father," the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then they are to be witnesses to the Gospel message in Jerusalem, Samaria (which we heard about last week), and to the ends of the earth. This is the outline of the Book of Acts with preaching in Jerusalem, in Samaria, and with St. Paul to Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome.

Acts offers several key points. Theophilus means, Lover of God. Thus, it is addressed to all believers, and there are lessons for all Christians to learn from Acts about responding to God's invitation and works. The Father promises the Spirit to all who believe. The gift of the Spirit will be like a baptism, an immersion, into the way of life and mission of Christ. The Spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism by John and led him into his ministry. So too, with us, we are called to be guided by the Spirit in living our lives and continuing the work of Jesus. Thirdly, the Apostles were challenged by the angels to not focus on looking back but to look forward to being Christ's witnesses in their words and deeds.

The Gospel account is a shorter version with Christ commissioning them to teach and baptize (often called the Great Commission). Matthew regularly uses "Son of Man" for Jesus. In Daniel, "One like the Son of Man" was given "dominion, glory, and kingship" (Dan 7: 13-14). Jesus affirms that in his resurrected state, all authority has been given to him, and by that authority, he commissions and sends them forth to spread the Gospel to all nations. The Jewish community had not openly recruited people of other races or nations. Jesus is challenging the disciples to a much broader view and openness to God's plan for humanity.

Baptism is presented here as a key manifestation of one's acceptance of the Gospel and becoming a disciple of Jesus. The formula presented here is the one that was adopted by the church in the early centuries. It has been most Christian churches throughout the ages.

The use of the Trinitarian formula has been understood as an obedience to Christ's instruction. (The alternative form of baptizing in the name of Jesus, which appears in the Acts of the Apostles, has been used by some Pentecostal and non-denominational churches in recent centuries.)

In Matthew, Jesus gathers them at a mountain, just as he gathered them to listen to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 -7) and for the Transfiguration (Matthew 17). Gathering at a mountain is an invitation. Something important is happening and so pay attention. It recalls Moses and Elijah both encountering God on the mountain.

Three phrases are worth considering in depth. Even when they saw Jesus, "they doubted." This theme is a continuation of the "little faith" that they had shown earlier. Doubt reflects the response of many believers throughout the ages. None of us are alone in doubting, even the Apostles doubted, but that does not stop Jesus from entrusting the mission to us. It is not by our power but by God's power that we find the strength to live the Gospel. Secondly, Jesus commissions them to teach and baptize "all the nations." Our awareness is often limited by our culture and experience. Christians are called to have a universal perspective. Catholic means universal. Thirdly, Jesus declares that "I am with you always." Many people feel alone and isolated. Anxiety can drain energy as people try to figure out how they are going to handle situations. Amid every chaotic moment when we are not in control, Jesus assures us that "I am with you" and "Do not be afraid."

The Letter to the Ephesians is from St Paul and shows his literary style. There are just three sentences that make up the whole passage. It begins with thanksgiving for what God has done in and through Jesus, including the gift of the Spirit. Paul highlights the meaning of what has been proclaimed in the gospels. It is also a prayer for believers that we may have the Spirit of Wisdom and be enlightened to recognize what God has done for us and how Christ is now exercising authority. God raised Jesus from the dead, seated him at God's right hand, and put all things under his feet. Jesus is Lord of all creation. As believers, we have accepted his lordship. Although it does not recognize him, the rest of creation is under his authority and will gradually come to know this, as "all things are under his feet."

Themes:

Ascension	Lordship of Jesus
Commission of the Baptized	Discipleship

Reflection Questions:

How do you understand the Church and its mission?

In what ways are you aware of what God has done for you? How has God's power touched your life?

What are some doubts that challenge you in believing the Gospel?

When faced with fear or anxiety, what can help you remember that you are not alone and that Jesus is with you, and that the Spirit is within you?

Prayer suggestions:

For the Church: that, empowered by the Spirit, we may faithfully give witness to the Gospel and continue Christ's mission of bringing hope and healing to those in need

For the grace of discipleship: that through the words of Jesus and the example of the early disciples, we may discover how to help others to come to know the risen Lord and to live as disciples

For deeper awareness: that the Spirit will lead us into a deeper relationship with Jesus so that our choices and desires may flow from the new life of the resurrected Lord

For all who spread the Good News: that God will inspire evangelists, missionaries, preachers, composers, and writers to dynamically announce God's abiding presence and untiring love for all

For the grace of conversion: that we may strive to bring the brokenness, injustice, addictions, and selfishness of our society under the saving and redeeming reign of Christ

Novena:

The novena (nine days of prayer) leading to Pentecost continues this week. Even if you have not prayed these last couple of days, you can join in the prayer that the whole church makes for a renewal of the Spirit in the church and every human heart. You can pray however you like. Here is one sample, composed by Dan Schutte, of music and prayer suggestions to guide you through the days. It was composed in 2020 and thus has references to the pandemic.

<https://www.danschuttemusic.com/wordpressstore/pentecost-novena/>