

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

May 17, 2026 – ASCENSION SUNDAY, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Homily: “*A Call to Action by our Risen and Ascended King*”

Acts 1:1-11	(Jesus ascends into Heaven; on the Father knows when He returns)
Psalms 47	(God has gone up with a shout; He is King over all nations)
Ephesians 1:15-23	(God has raised Christ into the Heavenly places)
St. Luke 24:44-53	(Jesus opens the disciples' minds to the Scriptures and ascends)

Today, we commemorate Christ's Ascension into Heaven. But what exactly is the Ascension? If we're not careful, we may mistake Jesus's Ascension as a kind of retirement send-off—Jesus finishes His work and then sits down to enjoy the fruits of His labor. But that's not what happens at all. This isn't simply Jesus' return home from earth to Heaven. It is an enthronement for Jesus Christ, bringing us and the entire world into a new relationship with God.¹ Christ ascends to Heaven where He stands in the presence of God as our perfect priest, sacrifice, and king.

The author of Hebrews (7:23-27 NIV) tells us, “Now there have been many . . . priests [and] death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the Heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.” Jesus was the only priest ever to offer *Himself* as the ultimate sacrifice, once and for all, for the sins of the world.

One of my favorite images of Christ shows Him on the cross clothed in priestly garments, with a royal crown upon His head. He is depicted as priest, sacrifice, and king, all in one. King of what? Only Christians? No. Christ as God is King of the Universe and of the Heavens into which He ascended; King of the seas upon which He walked; King of the earth, which was created by, through, and for Him (see the first chapter of John). Christ's Ascension reminds us that *we* do not have dominion over *anything*. We are not in control—God is. We can't remake the world—only God can.²

Moreover, the Ascension of Jesus is not an abandonment of His earthly body but a new form of His presence, shifting from a localized physical existence to being present everywhere through God's Holy Spirit, transcending time and space to abide in our hearts, in the Holy Eucharist, and in His Word. In John 16:7, Jesus explains that His Ascension—His going away—is necessary for the Holy Spirit to come to believers. As such, the Ascension prepares the way for Pentecost, which we will celebrate next Sunday. Before He returned to Heaven, Jesus promised us that “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).

Jesus promised that we would never be left alone or without divine help, because the Holy Spirit—our Advocate (or Champion), Comforter and Guide—will continue to teach us, form us and remind us of everything Jesus has spoken in love.

The Ascension also invites us to stop gazing upward into the clouds and to embrace our mission here on earth, which is to spread the good news of the Gospel everywhere and any way we can. The Ascension is not a time for nostalgia about Christ's ministry on earth, but a call to action. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus tells His followers—and *us*—to “Go and make disciples of all nations.” The angels asked the apostles why they were standing there staring at the empty sky. Like them, we are called to look outward, to bring the Gospel to wherever God has entrusted us to share the good news of His truth, mercy, forgiveness, love, and compassion for all people.

The Italian composer Giacomo Puccini composed the operas *La Boheme*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Tosca*. It was during his battle with terminal cancer in 1922 that he began to write *Turandot*, which many now consider his best work. He worked on the score day and night, despite his friends' advice to rest and save his energy. When his illness worsened, Puccini said to his disciples, "If I don't finish *Turandot*, I want you to complete it." He died in 1924, leaving the work unfinished. His students gathered all that had been written for *Turandot*, studied it in great detail, and then proceeded to compose the remainder of the opera.

The world premiere was performed at La Scala Opera House in Milan in 1926, and Maestro Arturo Toscanini, Puccini's favorite student, conducted it. The opera went beautifully, until Toscanini came to the end of the part written by Puccini. He stopped the music, put down the baton, turned to the audience, and announced, "Thus far the master wrote, but he died." There was a long pause; no one moved. Then Toscanini picked up the baton, turned to the audience and, with tears in his eyes, announced, "But his disciples finished his work." The opera closed to thunderous applause and found a permanent place in the annals of great musical works.

Just as Puccini's students were instructed to complete his work after *their* master left *them*, Jesus instructs *us* as part of His Ascension message to finish *His* work of saving humankind by furthering His Good News in our words, deeds, and prayers.³ Christ came down from Heaven to share in our human life, in all our joys and sufferings. Today, He ascends into Heaven so that eventually we can follow Him there, for every road now leads to Heaven if we walk with Jesus who goes with us. So let's keep walking with Him! And this week, as we await the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost Sunday, let us ask our Lord to bless us with every gift and grace from the Heavenly Places.⁴

Let us Pray:

Holy God and Father of the risen and ascended Christ, You surround us with witnesses who have shown us the way. Inspire us with Your Spirit to stop looking into the heavens and start doing the work of Your kingdom.

Help us to seek justice and peace, becoming a people who nourish, clothe, and weep with those who mourn. Help us to love kindness, becoming a people who forgive and accept forgiveness, a people who show mercy and live in charity. Help us to walk humbly with You, as people whose secret identities melt away revealing Christ living within us.

Almighty God, whose blessed Son our Savior Jesus Christ ascended far above the heavens that He might fill all things, mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to His promise, He abides with His Church here on earth, even to the end of the ages.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, Your risen and ascended Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*⁵

¹ Adapt. Mike Cosper, "Illustration," *ThePastorsWorkshop*, n.d. <https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations/mike-cosper-confusion-about-the-Ascension-id_3382> 9 May 2026.

² Adapt. Tony Thurston, "For the Feast of Christ the King," *St. Joseph the Worker*, Weirton WV, 24 November 2019 <<https://stjoeweirton.org/homily-given-by-rev-tony-thurston-for-the-feast-of-christ-the-king-november-24-2019/>> 9 May 2026.

³ Adapt. Tony Kadavil, "Ascension of our Lord," 25 May 2025. <<https://frtonyshomilies.com/2025/05/25/Ascension-of-our-lord-2/>> 9 May 2026.

⁴ Adapt. José H. Gomez, "Homily – Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord," 24 May 2020 <<https://lacatholics.org/2020/05/24/homily-solemnity-of-the-Ascension-of-the-lord/>> 9 May 2026.

⁵ Adapt. "A Prayer on Ascension Sunday," *St. Thérèse of Lisieux Catholic Church*, n.d. <<https://sttheresecatholicchurch.org/news/a-prayer-on-ascension-sunday/>> 9 May 2026.