

Sermon for the Feast of the Ascension
May 29, 2025 Yr C
St. Mary's Barnstable
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Luke 24:44-53

Early in my faith life, I assumed the Ascension was a little like Jesus getting promoted. Like after Easter, he's clocked enough miracles, logged enough parables, and finally, it's time for the big celestial corner office -- complete with a cloud. One moment he's blessing the disciples, and the next, up he goes -- no chariot of fire, just a kind of holy lift-off. Luke tells us, quite simply, "He withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." I always imagine the disciples standing there with that dazed look you get when the person you're counting on suddenly hands you the keys and says, "You're in charge now."

It's a poignant and peculiar scene. Jesus leads them out as far as Bethany -- a place with memories: the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, the place where Jesus had wept and feasted and prayed. And there, he blesses them. That's the final gesture: not a speech, not a miracle, but a blessing. His hands raised, he pours grace over them like oil -- fitting, since these same hands had broken bread, washed feet, and carried a cross. And then, as he's blessing them -- *not after, not before*, but in the very act of blessing -- he withdraws.

It's such a gentle image. No cosmic fanfare, no dramatic exit music. Jesus doesn't leave with a bang but with a benediction.

And the disciples? Strangely enough, they are not devastated. Not this time. They don't go back to the Upper Room in fear like they did after the crucifixion. No, Luke says they returned to Jerusalem "with great joy." Joy! After watching Jesus *leave*! That's not the reaction we'd expect. But I think something finally clicked for them—that Jesus hadn't really left at all. He hadn't been taken away so much as multiplied. Loosed into the world. Diffused into every act of love, every Eucharistic moment, every quiet corner of worship where two or three gather in his name.

Now, let me confess something. I imagine if I had been one of the disciples that day, I would have panicked. "Wait! You're going now? We just figured out what resurrection is and now you're *ascending*? Is there a manual? Who's in charge of table linens? Where's the to-do list?" This is probably why I am not in the original twelve.

But you know who wouldn't have panicked? The Altar Guild. The Altar Guild would've looked at each other and said, "All right, people. Let's get to work." And then someone would've quietly ironed the corporal, found the good purificator, and made sure the Paschal candle didn't drip wax on the rug.

Because if there is a group of people who know what it means to prepare for Jesus to show up -- even and especially when he doesn't look like you expect -- it's you. The Altar Guild.

You prepare holy ground with starch and polish and prayer. You wrestle with sacristy drawers that haven't opened since 1983. You decipher handwritten notes in the flower guild calendar written in a dialect only known to your predecessor. You transform chaos into liturgical order -- every week. You don't ascend -- you descend. Into sacristies, into the details, into service.

And here's the thing. I'm convinced that Jesus, when he lifted his hands to bless the disciples, wasn't just blessing *them*. He was blessing *you*. Blessing everyone who would carry on the work of embodying him. Everyone who would make space for his presence in bread and wine and song and silence.

You see, Ascension Day isn't about absence. It's about *presence*. A new kind of presence -- Christ no longer limited to one place, one body, one moment in time. Instead, he becomes present in the Church. In *us*. In candles lit in dim chapels. In worn pages of the Gospel book. In chalices polished and polished again. In the altar prepared as lovingly as a grandmother sets the table for Sunday supper.

Now, let's be honest. Not everyone sees what you see. Some folks come to church and think the altar sets itself. Or that the fair linen magically floats down from heaven each week, perfectly pressed. They don't see the sacred art behind the scenes. But God sees it. And Jesus, who once folded his burial cloth with care before walking out of the tomb, knows exactly how much holiness can be hidden in the humble and the handmade.

So today, as we remember Jesus ascending -- not into the clouds alone, but into our hearts and our hands -- I want to say thank you. Thank you for your quiet faithfulness. For showing up early and staying late. For knowing the rhythm of the liturgical year better than the priest sometimes does. For holding the mystery in your hands -- literally.

Jesus withdrew, yes -- but not to leave us. To bless us. To trust us. To call us. And the disciples went back to Jerusalem with joy because they finally realized: they were not waiting *for* the Church anymore. *They* were the Church.

And so are you. Not just caretakers of linens and vessels -- but caretakers of holy space. Curators of beauty. Bearers of Christ's presence.

So keep doing what you do. Keep making the way ready. Keep preparing the table. Because he is still showing up.

And if anyone ever asks where Jesus went, you can just smile and say, "He's right here. And we've already got the altar set."

Amen.