

“Telling the Truth”

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Cove Presbyterian Church

Ascension Sunday is one of the more obscure church holidays, is it not?

It doesn't quite pack the pews like Christmas Eve or Easter. Indeed, many say Ascension Day is the least celebrated and least understood major holy day on the Christian calendar.

Ironically for us, the day should be very Presbyterian. John Calvin, who you might call our foundational theologian, placed great importance on the ascended and reigning Christ as Lord of the world and head of the church.¹

And yet if you didn't even know today was Ascension Sunday before you sat down for worship, I'm certain you're in good company. It's the holiday that's always gotten the short end of the stick — perhaps because Ascension Day is technically a Thursday, falling 40 days after Easter and 10 days before Pentecost. By my estimation, the only other non-Sunday holy days we tend to celebrate on the closest Sunday instead are Epiphany and All Saints Day.

The others, like Ash Wednesday or, of course, Christmas Eve, we deem significant enough to warrant an extra worship service. But not Ascension Day.

And yet... the gospel story cannot be told with Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter alone. The ascension is a key turning point between the story of Jesus as found in the gospels and the story of the early Church as found in Acts and the epistles. “Indeed, the Book of Acts could be subtitled, ‘Jesus Ascends, the Holy Spirit Descends, and the Church is Born.’”²

On the first Ascension Day, we find ourselves at the Mount of Olives with 11 of the 12 original apostles. In the 40 days since his resurrection — 40 days since we last encountered these two men in white clothes asking Jesus's followers why they are looking for something or someone in the wrong place — Acts says the embodied Christ has been

¹ (*Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Geneva Press, 2003, 108-109))

² “For the Love of the World: SALT's Commentary for Ascension Sunday,” May 10, 2026,

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/5/17/ascension-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-ascension-sunday>

"present[ing] himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them ... and speaking about the kingdom of God."³

But that mention of 40 is our first clue that something meaningful is about to happen. That number might remind us of God making it rain for 40 days and nights during the flood in Genesis; Moses going up to Mount Sinai for 40 days on two different occasions in Exodus; Jesus fasting in the wilderness and being tempted for 40 days in the Gospels — among other stories. 40 days is figure of speech; a biblical approximation.⁴ It "symbolizes an extended period of preparation and examination for ... difficult work ahead."⁵

I wonder if the apostles recognize that difficult work is right around the corner when they ask, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"⁶ In other words: now that you've conquered death, Jesus, can you also restore the people Israel to eminence? Or, can you at least grant us political autonomy and deliver us from Roman occupation?⁷

It is the question on everyone's mind. If this is the dawn of a new age, the apostles wonder, what will it look like? How will God's reign be organized? What will be our place in it?⁸

Theologian Willie James Jennings calls it a nationalist question: "When will we rule our land, and become self-determining, and if need be impose our will on others? All of this would," he says, "of course, be for the good of the world, they suppose.... The nationalism suggested here is not a historical nationalism bound to the anatomy of Israel, but the deeply human desire of every people to control their destiny and shape the world into their hoped-for eternal image."⁹

At its core, nationalism "emphasizes the importance of the 'homeland' and a shared ethnic identity among its citizens. Simultaneously, a powerful (but largely mythological) narrative of the past glorifies the nation's exceptionalism, its inherent goodness and righteousness, and its 'real' citizenry. ... A unified system of cultural norms serves to embody the

³ Acts 1:3

⁴ Skinner, Matthew L. *Interpretation Bible Commentary: Acts*, pg. 23

⁵ Wall, Robert W. *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Vol IX: Acts*, pg. 29

⁶ Acts 1:6

⁷ Skinner, pg. 24

⁸ Ward, Richard. "Seventh Sunday of Easter: Commentary on Acts 1:6-14," May 17, 2026,

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-16-14-7>

⁹ Jennings, Willie James. *Acts — Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, pg. 17

nationalist shared identity... [including] social patterns that enforce dominant values, morals, beliefs, and behaviors... and a legal system that punishes deviance.”¹⁰

Sound familiar? This kind of nationalism runs through this country, even now — a political ideology that, in our case, seeks to merge Christian identity with American civic life and national identity. Ours asserts that our nation is divinely chosen or blessed by God, and should be governed by select “Christian values,” as defined by those in charge, and that Christianity should be privileged over other religions. Such nationalism “places a god-bound-to-our-nation over the God of all nations”¹¹ — which is exactly what the apostles are poking around today from their own not-yet-Christian context. And so, they ask: will God establish for us a new era of Jewish rule comparable to what our ancestors enjoyed under King David?

Jesus’s response is swift: “It is not for you to know.”

It is not for you to know how or when God will restore the people Israel, if it even looks anything like you are imagining. That knowledge — and authority — is God’s alone.

But this response is not so much Jesus shutting down their question as it is a redirection: it is not for you to know and you don’t have that authority because humans most often wield such things for harm rather than good.

But you know what you do have? Power.

Power that will come from the Holy Spirit. Power that will enable you to be witnesses. Power that will bring God’s love to a broken and fearful world. All of it.

I mentioned a few weeks ago that the Greek word for witness is *martus*, from which we get the word “martyr.” But there is a plainer meaning of the term, which is being a truth-teller.¹²

¹⁰ “Standing Against White Christian Nationalism Recommendations and Rationale” on PC Biz, <https://www.pc-biz.org/search/3001498>

¹¹ Jennings, pg. 22

¹² Williams, Jeremy L. “Seventh Sunday of Easter: Commentary on Acts 1:6-14,” May 21, 2023, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-16-14-6>

The apostles will be given power through the Holy Spirit to tell the truth about Jesus, to declare what they themselves have experienced and know to be true about his amazing acts and teachings. They are to start in Jerusalem and move out into their home nations and indeed to all the world, because God's Spirit cannot be contained to one place or one people.

This power is not for nationalist hopes, or for self-determination or for wielding over others. This power will send them out, as Willie James Jennings says, "not as representatives of empire but as those announcing a revolution, the revolution of the intimate, God calling to the world."¹³

Yes, rather than worry about authority that rests outside of their control, the apostles are to focus on the power in their hands.

Here's how another New Testament scholar puts it:

The resurrected Jesus redirects the apostles from questions that were in God's authority, in order to lead them to see their own power that would transform the world and bring them into direct confrontation with both Roman and Jerusalem officials. Their power to tell the truth would directly challenge those who preferred to advance a lie for their own agenda. Their power to set the record straight would complicate the narrative of an empire that proclaimed peace and security while wielding lethal violence especially against low status people. Jesus redirects them from getting overwhelmed by what was outside of their control, and he leads them to anticipate the power that would be in their control for turning Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and the world into what it should be.¹⁴

Beloved, so it is for us. We too are given power by the Spirit to tell the truth about what we have seen and heard from Jesus Christ — how he teaches us to love our neighbor and feed the hungry and welcome the stranger and bring healing to broken places — and to set the record straight when we see that truth obscured by lies. The power that is in our control is being trustworthy. Staying grounded and connected. Discerning reality clearly and refusing manipulation. Resisting cruelty without becoming cruel. Keeping tenderness alive when hardness feels easier or more efficient.¹⁵ Cultivating courage. Having strong backs and soft fronts. And yes, telling the truth about our experiences of God's goodness —

¹³ Jennings, pg. 18

¹⁴ Williams

¹⁵ Inspired by Cameron Trimble, "Living in a Laboring World," February 17, 2026, https://www.pilotingfaith.org/p/living-in-a-laboring-world?utm_campaign=post-expanded-share&utm_medium=web&utm_source=facebook&utm_content=share&utm_term=facebook

goodness and mercy that shows no partiality to any people or nation, that affirms basic human rights and dignity for all.

God resists the fusion of divine authority with political domination, and so must we. It is the difficult work to which Christ calls all of his followers, then and now.

On this Sunday, we recognize that in his ascension, Christ “fills all things everywhere, so that there is no time or place when or where Christ is not, and there is no domain over which Jesus is not Lord.”¹⁶ Christ is not ascended to assert American dominance — or that of any other nation-state. Christ is not ascended to prioritize rich and powerful nations at the expense of poor and vulnerable ones. Christ is not ascended to bestow divine authority on any person or government.

Such authority belongs to the kingdom of God alone.

So friends, here is truth we can tell: this kingdom, from which Christ reigns, is not a political regime or a national identity. It is love, and it is life, and it is for the whole world.

And we have the power to bring that good news everywhere we go.

Thanks be to God.

¹⁶ Zhand, Brian. “Ascended, not Absent,” May 14, 2026, <https://brianzahnd.substack.com/p/ascended-not-absent-d76>