



The Ascension, Dosso Dossi, 16th century



Jesus' ascension to heaven depicted by John Singleton Copley, 1775



Christi Himmelfahrt by Gebhard Fugel, c. 1893

Ascension Day (Holy Thursday) Retreat

(Largely a reprint of the 2018 retreat material)

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this time of Retreat. You are commended for making time to focus on this very special event – the Ascension of Christ. The Ascension is often neglected because it falls between two great events which get a lot of attention – Christ's Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost!

- Please note that this booklet is designed to give you some ideas, methods and suggestions. It is not designed to direct you to any particular thoughts / ideas. It is for you to apply your mind, open your heart and allow the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts and ideas to what She desires that you to get out of this time of meditation, contemplation, and prayer.
- To get the most out of this retreat it is suggested you work through the sections in order but if you find a section which does not appeal to you, feel free to skip it.
- Section 1, 2 and 3 (3 and 4 really go together) are the meat of the retreat and you should choose to do what appeals to you. Spend as much time as you want to on each section. Ideally you should leave about 20 minutes to close off your time with either section 5 or 6. The appendix is an optional extra for anyone who may be interested in journeying deeper.

LET US PRAY

"Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the Name that is above every name, that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow in Heaven and on Earth and under the Earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"
Philippians 2:9-11

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty; heaven and earth are full of your Glory; glory be to you, O Lord most high.

Express your praise and thanks to God for all they are and what they have done. You may also want to sing (to yourself) a praise song/ hymn you know.

Lord God, as I remember your Ascension, please give me a clear conviction of your reality and power.

Father, draw me close to you and give me a clear and focused mind as I take time now to immerse myself in your word and spend time in your presence, listening for your voice. Let your Holy Spirit fill and guide me. Direct my thoughts and make me wise to see things through the lens of eternity. God within me, give me grace to recognize the stirrings of your Spirit within my soul and to listen attentively to what You have to say to me.

- Give me open ears, God that I may hear Your voice calling me.
- Give me an open mind, God, a mind ready to receive and to welcome new knowledge. Give me courage to change my mind when that is needed.
- Give me open eyes, God, eyes quick to discover your indwelling in the world which You have made.
- Give me open hands, God, hands ready to share with all who are in want the blessings with which you have enriched my life.
- Let all lovely things fill me with gladness and let them uplift my mind to your everlasting loveliness.

Amen.

Today we commemorate Ascension Day, an event that falls forty days after the Resurrection [Pascha]. The Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, commemorates the Christian belief of the bodily Ascension of Jesus into heaven. It is one of the ecumenical feasts (i.e., universally celebrated) of Christian churches.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He "presented Himself alive" (Acts 1:3) to the women near the tomb (Matthew 28:9-10), to His disciples (Luke 24:36-43), and to more than 500 others (1 Corinthians 15:6). In the days following His resurrection, Jesus taught His disciples about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus and His disciples went to Mount Olivet, near Jerusalem. There, Jesus promised His followers that they would soon receive the Holy Spirit, and He instructed them to remain in Jerusalem until the Spirit had come. Then Jesus blessed them, and as He gave the blessing, He began to ascend into heaven into the presence of God. Refer to Mark 16:19, Luke 24:50 - 53, Acts 1:2 and Acts 1:9-11 for ascension accounts.

Scripture tells us that Jesus' ascension was a literal, bodily return to heaven. He rose from the ground gradually and visibly, observed by many intent onlookers. As the disciples strained to catch a last glimpse of Jesus, a cloud hid Him from their view, and two men in white appeared and promised Christ's return "in just the same way that you have watched Him go".

Section 1: Praying with pictures

The Ascension has been a frequent subject in Christian art. By the 6th century the iconography of the Ascension had been established and by the 9th century Ascension scenes were being depicted on domes of churches. Many ascension scenes have two parts, an upper (Heavenly) part and a lower (earthly) part.

The ascending Christ may be carrying a resurrection banner or make a sign of benediction with his right hand. The blessing gesture by Christ with his right hand is directed towards the earthly group below him and signifies that He is blessing the entire Church. In the left hand, He may be holding a Gospel or a scroll, signifying teaching and preaching. (Wikipedia - Feast of the Ascension)

How To Pray Visio Divina

Visio Divina is translated as "divine seeing". It is related to the prayer form Lectio Divina (divine reading), but instead of Scripture, this form of prayer uses visual elements to help set your mind on prayer. It allows God to speak into your heart through the image.

- 1) Choose your image for prayer (refer to the cover or next pages).
- 2) Close your eyes, breathe, clear your mind, and ask God to enter into this time of prayer with you. Ask God to speak to you through this image.
- 3) Open your eyes and look at the image you've selected. Let your eyes pause and focus on the part of the image you are first drawn to.
- 4) Gaze on just that part of the image for a minute or two.
- 5) Now look at the whole image. Gaze upon all of the image, allowing it to elicit a word, an emotion, or an image in your heart.
- 6) What do you hear God whispering into your heart? What thoughts or questions is this image raising? What emotions do you feel?
- 7) Continue to gaze and reflect as long as you need to, then briefly close and rest your eyes.
- 8) Respond to God. Pray through the words, images, emotions, questions, and thoughts that are now on your heart.

- 9) As you close your time in prayer, open your eyes and gaze again upon the image. Rest in God's presence and think about what this prayer experience meant to you.
- 10) Consider how you will take this into your life. You may choose to journal about your experience.

Journal your experience here:

Eastern tradition



Rabbula Gospels 6th century



Andrei Rublev, 1408



19th century Macedonian icon, Bitola, Macedonia

Western tradition



Pietro Perugino 1496–1500



Rembrandt, 1636



Garofalo, 1520



Rosary Basilica, Lourdes, 19th century



Section 2 Imaginative prayer

Read Luke 24:50-53 and then Acts 1:9-11 (about 3 times – perhaps from different versions if possible). Considering the scriptures and the images presented earlier use the **imaginative method of prayer**.

1. Close your eyes and reconstruct the scene in your imagination. Use all 5 of your senses as you recall the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feelings. See what is going on and watch the men and women in the scene. What does Jesus look like? How do the others react to him? What are the people saying to one another? What emotions fill their words?
2. As one enters the scene sometimes there is a desire to be there. Place yourself in the scene, perhaps as an observer, or as one of the characters in the scene.
3. Allow the scene to unfold in your imagination. Reflect on the scene and mull over the actions. What do you feel? Engage in the scene to gain a more intimate knowledge of Jesus.
4. As you finish this time of prayer, take a moment to speak person to person with Christ saying what comes from your heart. It is helpful to journal your experience. Questions you may like to answer include: What can I take away from this? What new insights have I obtained? What has Jesus said to me?

Journal your thoughts and experience (or perhaps you want to draw your impressions of the scene):

Section 3: Some ideas on the meaning and importance of Ascension

Suggestion: Look at the 9 headings below. Choose one that appeals to you, read the notes through slowly several times, and then refer to the same number in Section 4, for some additional thoughts. Choose other numbers if you are finding this helpful.

Christ's ascension is crucial to know who Christ is and what he did. It is also important for the daily life of every believer. When Christ ascended into heaven, it wasn't just because he had finished things up, and needed to get back to heaven to rest and unwind. There is more to it than the fact of Christ's departing. Instead, the ascension is of vital importance for the whole of the Christian faith. Here are some suggestions from various people of why....

1. It signaled the end of His earthly ministry, marked the return of His heavenly glory and it symbolized His exaltation by the Father

Jesus completed His earthly mission of bringing salvation to all people and physically was lifted up from this world into heaven. The meaning and the fullness of Christ's Resurrection is given in the Ascension. Having completed His mission in this world as the Savior, He returned to the Father in heaven who sent Him into the world.

On the Feast of the Ascension, we do not merely commemorate a historical event in the life of Christ. On this day, the Church celebrates Christ's physical departure from the world and His glorification with God the Father.

- God the Father had lovingly sent His Son into the world at Bethlehem, and now the Son was returning to the Father. The period of human limitation was at an end.
- Jesus' glory had been veiled during His sojourn on earth, with one brief exception at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9).
- He was exalted by the Father (Ephesians 1:20-23). The One with whom the Father is well pleased (Matthew 17:5) was received up in honor and given a name above all names (Philippians 2:9).
- The ascension is about Christ's Authority. Christ *"has gone into Heaven and is at God's right hand - with angels, authorities and powers in submission to Him"* 1 Peter 3:22 and *"...All authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to Me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you..."* Matthew 28:18-20.

2. Restored to communion with God

The Symbol of Faith - the **Nicene Creed** - which summarizes the important doctrines and teachings of the Church, contains these words: "And ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father." The importance and meaning of this feast is that Jesus glorified our fallen and sinful humanity when He returned to the Father. In Jesus, who is perfect God and perfect man, man is reunited with God. At His birth, Jesus took on our human nature. Through His Ascension He deified this human nature by taking His Body to heaven and giving it a place of honor at the right hand of the Father. With Christ, man's nature also ascends. Through Christ, man becomes a "partaker of divine nature" (**2 Peter 1:4**). When Christ became man, He took up human nature and we share our human nature with Him. It is through Christ, who is perfect God and perfect man that we "partake of divine nature." When we say that Christ is sitting at the right hand of the Father, we mean that man has been restored to communion with God because Christ gives His humanity - which He shares with us - a permanent place of honor in heaven. Christ honors us by putting us close to the Father. In ascending to the Father, Christ raises earth to heaven with Him!

3. We know Christ's earthly work was successful

The time span of forty days is used symbolically in the Holy Scriptures and by the Church to indicate that an appropriate amount of time has passed for "completeness". [e.g. The rains of the great flood lasted for forty days. Christ prayed in the wilderness for forty days.]

Christ's birth marked a new epoch in world history. So did His death. So did His resurrection. Like these epochal events, Christ's ascension also marks a massive shift in the course of the world's events. No longer was Christ personally present. Now, he was ascending back to his father. He had predicted that this time would come. Now, it was here.

4. We celebrate the Lord's Supper in anticipation of His return

Every Christian church celebrates the Lord's Supper. In this event, we are reminded ourselves of Christ's death and resurrection. Scripture tells us "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." This celebration is part of our ongoing proclamation of Christ's ascension, in that we observe it continually until Christ returns. By testifying to Christ's death and resurrection, we are also testifying to the importance of His ascension.

5. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit

Before He ascended into heaven, Jesus told His followers to remain in Jerusalem because in a few days they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit (see **Acts 1:1-12** and **Luke 24:13-53**).

Shortly after He ascended, an enormous spiritual change took place. The huddled group of depressed and timid disciples burst forth in an explosion of miraculous healing, intrepid proclamation, and inspired activity. What brought about this change? The Holy Spirit. As Christ promised, He sent them the Holy Spirit — God's very presence within believers. The coming of the Holy Spirit, which we celebrate at Pentecost, was contingent upon Christ's ascension. Far from being a side effect of the ascension, the Holy Spirit's arrival on the scene depended on Christ's ascended return. Now, with the Spirit's presence in our lives, we are given the task of going and making disciples in this power. The Spirit comes to reconcile and reunite the world with God. Christ's Body is in heaven and His Spirit is here on earth.

6. We begin to look ahead to witnessing— in His timing

Jesus encourages his followers to "wait...for the promise of the Father. God has important work for us to do for Him, but we need to be on God's timing. We should not rush out in our own strength to do His work. We need to wait, to be led by and filled with His Spirit, and to go out in God's Power to be most effective. Often we try to witness by our own power and authority. Witnessing is not showing what we can do for God, it is showing and telling what God has done for us.

The angels ask – 'Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?'

This is a good question and one we must ask ourselves. Are we looking toward heaven or are we looking for mission opportunities? Will we be ready to follow the Spirit's lead when She speaks gently and softly to us?

We are to concentrate on the mission given to us by Christ "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth". God's plan for this age is one of witness to our Lord, empowered by the Spirit of God.

7. We experience Christ's role as High Priest

The ascension indicated the beginning of His new work as High Priest ("*Therefore, since we have a great High Priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess*" - Hebrews 4:14-16) and Mediator of the New Covenant (Hebrews 9:15).

If there were no ascension, there would be no "Christ interceding for us" (Romans 8:34) "...who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." When Paul wrote, he listed in order

Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, remarking on the blessing of His intercession on our behalf. What a blessing to know that we have Christ himself interceding on our behalf before God.

8. We yearn for Christ's coming

As His Disciples were looking on, He was lifted up - or "ascended" - and a cloud took Him out of sight. While they were looking up, two angels in white robes appeared and said to them: "Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking into the sky? Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, this same Jesus will come back in the same way as you have seen Him go there."

The Ascension is, therefore, a sign and symbol of the Second Coming. Christ will return to the earth in the same manner as He left it. When the risen Lord returns again in glory, God's will for mankind will be fulfilled.

The ascension set the pattern for His return. When Jesus comes to set up the Kingdom, He will return just as He left - bodily, and visibly in the clouds (Acts 1:11; Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 24:30; Revelation 1:7)

When Christ ascended, he promised that he would return someday. The period in which we live is a time of looking forward to His return. The first recorded words after Christ ascended came from the angels who came to celebrate the event — "Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." This is a comforting promise that goes with us every day of our lives and inspires our evangelistic action.

9. We look forward to the place he is preparing for us (John 14:2)

Jesus anticipated our desire that Christ could be here on earth right now with us. That's why we have the Holy Spirit. And perhaps that's also why Jesus left his disciples with these remarks, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:2) Christ returned to heaven to prepare a place for us. Obviously, we don't know what kind of preparations He is making, but we are assured that we have a lot to look forward to.

IN SUMMARY

Currently, the Lord Jesus is in heaven. The Scriptures frequently picture Him at the right hand of the Father - a position of honor and authority (Psalm 110:1; Ephesians 1:20; Hebrews 8:1). Christ is the Head of the Church (Colossians 1:18), the giver of spiritual gifts (Ephesians 4:7-8), and the One who fills all in all (Ephesians 4:9-10).

We celebrate the Ascension with the same great joy the Apostles had when they were promised that the Holy Spirit would come to bear witness to the presence of Christ in the Church. Ascension Day is joyful, not only because Christ is glorified, but also because we are glorified with Him. We are joyful because He goes to "prepare a place" for us and because He is forever present before the Father to intercede for us.

We are joyful as we look forward to remembering the giving and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

(Commentary on 6 of the points above come from Daniel Threlfall - Church Resources <https://www.sharefaith.com/blog/2013/05/ascension-day-important/>)

Section 4: Self-reflection / Meditation/ Contemplation – where the rubber hits the road

Take the time now to explore further and to consider how this day will impact and transform your life, how it will influence your thoughts, what you will do, who you will be and how it may enable you to grow closer to God.

The numbers below align to the numbers of the ideas in the Meaning and importance of Ascension in section 3 above:

1 and 7 It signaled the end of His earthly ministry, marked the return of His heavenly glory and it symbolized His exaltation by the Father. We experience Christ's role as High Priest

The Ascension meant that Christ was returning to His former place of authority in heaven. He was reclaiming His former place of glory and was beginning a new ministry for believers in heaven – He would be our Intercessor. (Bible answers – Elmer L Towns)

Soon after the event the disciples were filled with worship and Joy and obeyed Jesus by returning to Jerusalem. We too should mirror their response and joyfully worship God.

- As I meditate on this – I praise and worship God for who He is. I ask the Spirit to reveal to me what God means to me and what this means to me for my life. Be in conversation with God (remembering to listen for the quiet still voice of God).
- Take time to share my needs with God asking him to intercede on my behalf. Imagine your loving God doing this.

2. Restored to communion with God

Consider, meditate and reflect on what it means to be restored to communion with God – share with God what this means to me and how this impacts my life.

3. We know Christ's earthly work was successful

The intro to Acts in Eugene Peterson's Message says: "The story of Jesus doesn't end with Jesus. It continues in the lives of those who believe in him. The supernatural does not stop with Jesus. Luke makes it clear that these Christians he wrote about were no more spectators of Jesus than Jesus was a spectator of God - they are in on the action of God. God acting in them. God living in them. Which also means, of course, in us"

Consider:

- Christ's life and what that has meant to me. Respond to him.
- What is my purpose in life? What do I need to do to ensure that it is 'successful' in God's eyes?

4. We celebrate the Lord's Supper in anticipation of his return

Memories are precious; they keep us connected to people, places, and events that have shaped us and influenced our lives. Jesus, the Master Teacher, used the Last Supper to plant an important memory in His disciples gathered in that upper room. As Jesus raised the bread and the cup in thanksgiving, He added new significance to this ancient ritual.

Every time we celebrate the Lord's supper we are confronted with the amazing mystery of God's grace.

Think back to the last time you received communion. What did it mean to you? How did you feel before and after? Consider whether this sacrament has become routine to you and lost some of its meaning.

Reflect on the fact that the Lord's Supper is a reminder of what Jesus did in the past, a symbol of our present relationship with him, and a promise of what he will do in the future.

5. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit

What does it mean to be filled by the Holy Spirit?

What is the call to action that I am being encouraged by God towards?

6. We begin to look ahead to witnessing– in His timing

Am I being led by the Spirit to witness - in Her timing?

Am I filled with God's Spirit and going out in God's Power to show and tell what God has done for me or in my own strength?

Am I looking toward heaven or am I looking for mission opportunities?

Am I ready to follow the Spirit's lead, when She speaks gently and softly to me?

8. We yearn for Christ's coming

- If you knew that Jesus would return one week from now, what things might change in your activities and attitudes towards people during the course of the week? List them and consider the implications.
- John Wesley tells us that he was once asked how he would spend the intervening time if he knew that The Lord was coming at midnight tomorrow. His reply: "Just as I intend to spend it now. I should preach tonight and again tomorrow morning, Then I would ride to Tewkesbury, preach, meet the societies, go to friend Martins house....go to my room at 10 o'clock, commend myself to my Heavenly Father, lie down to rest, and wake up in glory." Is this an appropriate attitude? Compare it with your answer above. Why could Wesley say this? What are the implications for you?

9. We look forward to the place he is preparing for us

- Imagine what heaven will be like.
- Perhaps read the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12 and Luke 6:20-26 to find a good description of the nature of heaven.
- Meditate on the qualities of heavenly life. Imagine what your future in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit's presence will be like. Imagine arriving in heaven and meeting them 'face to face' and reconnecting with your brothers and sisters in the faith.
- In this meditation discover how a perspective of the eternal can guide and strengthen our present lives (Journey of the Spirit by Trevor Hudson and Morton Kelsey).

Journal your experience here:

To draw your retreat to a close, you may like to pray a Centering Prayer, or to pray an Examen of this time of retreat

Section 5: Centering Prayer

The aim of this prayer is to be deeply available and open to God. You are simply asked to be, to give yourself completely into that deeper, mysterious presence.

Before you begin, choose a sacred word (like peace, Jesus, joy, Abba) which you will use when you become aware that you are thinking, instead of just being.

You may want to set a timer on your cell phone according to the amount of time you will be centering - 5, 10 or 20 minutes.

- Sit so that you are comfortable. Feet flat on the ground helps; feel your back supported and align your posture so that you can breathe effortlessly.
- Begin by becoming aware of the sounds around you..... the faint hum of traffic.....dogs barking.....children shouting.
- Now allow your awareness to come inside, notice the space you are in, feel the in and out of your breathing – the reassurance that the Breath of God, the spirit is with us always.
- Move to experience the reality that God is indeed here. You are on holy ground.
- Be conscious of God as present to you, whose goodness towards you and generally as part of creation, is assured; the God who loves you with an everlasting love is here.
- Remain in the awareness that the Lord who made you, loves you and knows you. He is active in your life, is present to you here and now, waiting to listen.....waiting to speak.....
- When you catch yourself thinking, let the thought go. Gently, in the quiet of your heart, speak your sacred word, which symbolizes your consent to God's presence and action within you. Keep returning to God – to that state of open receptivity.

At the end of your time of silence pray

Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; they will be done; in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.

AMEN.

Section 6: Prayer of the examen of consciousness

In this prayer we look back in order to look forward.

Reflect on this day, and particularly this time of retreat. Look at your encounters and experiences with God, asking him to bring clarity and understanding, to show you what it is He wants you to notice.

How did you feel when you woke this morning, and thought about your day? What were your thoughts as you prepared to go to church, and as you journeyed to Delta Park? What was your reaction to the environment around you, the people who gathered?

Review the time spent in silence...with God. What was your experience of the material offered to guide you in the retreat?

Look for the moments and feelings of consolation - when you experienced an increase in faith, hope and love. Look also for the moments of desolation – when was I drained of faith, hope and love? What do you think God is communicating to you through your emotions?

Ask for forgiveness for anything not of God in your life, that the Spirit has brought to your attention.

What is the most significant thing that you will take away with you from this time of retreat?

Express your gratitude to God for all that is of Him in your day, all that you have become aware of in this time of reflection and for the blessings you have received.

Thank God for His presence with you, the moving of His Spirit and the encounter you have experienced.

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation (October 27, 2016)

The Cosmic Christ: Heaven and Earth Are One



After the microcosmic moment of Jesus, human and divine in time, the hourglass diagram begins expanding again.

Jesus was not born as the Christ. A transfiguration, a morphing, a realization had to take place, even in Jesus, before he became the Anointed One in which everything else cohered and held together (see Colossians, Ephesians, and the prologue to John's Gospel). The resurrected Jesus is the Christ. The Risen Christ is Jesus but also bigger and beyond Jesus' individual form and lifetime.

My systematics professor used to say that if the Resurrection had been filmed, it probably would *not* have shown a man stepping out of the tomb holding a flag, as most Christian art illustrates. The camera probably would have recorded a huge flash of light. The Risen Christ is Jesus released from all space/time restrictions. He is beyond space; he is beyond time. He includes all of the spiritual and the physical world, reconciled within himself.

Next on our diagram of the Cosmic Christ is the Ascension. In the story of Christ's ascension as told in Acts (1:9-11), angels appear next to the disciples as they gaze after the rising figure. The angels ask, "Why are you standing here staring up into heaven?" Most of Christianity has been doing just that, straining to find the historical Jesus "up there." *Where did he go?* We've been obsessed with the question because we think the universe is divided into separate levels—heaven and earth. But it is one universe and all within it is transmuted and transformed by the glory of God. The whole point of the Incarnation and Risen Body is that the Christ is *here*—and always was! But now we have a story that allows us to imagine it just might be true.

Jesus didn't go anywhere. He became the universal omnipresent Body of Christ. That's why the final book of the Bible promises us a new heaven *and* a new earth. (Revelation 21:1), not an escape from earth. We focused on "going" to heaven instead of living on earth as Jesus did—which makes heaven and earth one. It is heaven all the way to heaven. What you choose now is exactly what you choose to be forever. God will not disappoint you.