

Mark 14, 2026 – Ephesians 1:15-23

Teaching the Ascension of our Lord to preschoolers and kindergartners is hard. It's one of the events in the life of Christ that I include in my chapel services every year. And every year I struggle with it a little.

The story itself is easy. Jesus takes the disciples onto a hilltop. Gives them the Great Commission. Then rises up into heaven. There's really not much to it. But I discovered years ago that I had to be careful not to leave the story there. Because for a group of 4, 5, and 6 year olds, describing the ascension of Jesus in those terms is terrifying.

He just abandons them? The idea of the adult that they trust just floating away into the clouds is not at all comforting for a child. Then again, its not that comforting for an adult either. It may not be quite as scary, but it's no less bewildering. The angels who appears to the disciples after the ascension make it clear that the disciples spent a good deal of time simply staring into the sky, asking themselves, "What now?"

Jesus had gone away. He was absent. And though they had the promise of his return on the clouds one day, that didn't eliminate the separation that they felt. The distance that now stood between Jesus and his disciples. His disciples then and his disciples now. We who sometimes struggle to deal with the same fears as little children. And the same bewilderment as those men on the hilltop.

But in our Epistle lesson today, St. Paul speaks about the Ascension in different terms. For Paul, the Ascension is not Christ withdrawing from His people. It is Christ filling all things for the sake of His people. It is not Jesus becoming distant. It is Jesus reigning everywhere while remaining near to His Church.

Theologians often refer to this as a "tension." You've maybe heard me use that word before. When two things seem at odds with each other and yet are both true, that's a tension. Like two objects held close together by a compressed spring. If you let go of one end, then it will shoot out and be lost. If you let go of the other, it too will be lost. But if you're really careful and hold them really tight, they can keep them both together at the same time.

St Paul sets up a theological tension in Ephesians 1. The tension between Christ's transcendence and Christ's nearness. On the one hand, Christ is exalted beyond all imagination. God the Father "*raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.*" Far above all. Not merely above earthly kings or nations, but above every spiritual and earthly power alike.

*"Above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come."* There is no higher throne, no rival kingdom, nothing that exists now or ever will exist in the future that can threaten His reign. The risen Christ rules over all things. This is the glory of the Ascension: the same Jesus born of Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, and laid in a borrowed tomb now reigns at the Father's right hand. Human flesh sits upon the throne of heaven. The crucified One governs the universe.

And, frankly, this can be easy to forget. Because the world often doesn't appear like it belongs to Him. Governments are corrupt. Nations are at war. Disease weakens the body. And behind all these things stand the darker enemies of sin, death, and the devil. The Christian life can feel very small beneath such enormous powers. And the Church itself can appear weak and unimpressive in the eyes of the world.

But Paul says, "Look higher. Look beyond all of that." Christ reigns above every power you fear. Above every authority that intimidates you. Above every spiritual enemy that accuses you. Above death itself. The Ascension declares that Jesus is not merely a religious teacher remembered by His followers. He is the living Lord of heaven and earth.

And yet, we have to maintain the tension. Because Christ is not just transcendent. Even as he sits above heaven and earth, Jesus is also still very, very near to us. And so Paul immediately turns and holds this tension together when he says, "*And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*"

The exalted Christ isn't separated from His people. He is their Head and the Church is His body. Paul could have said that Christ merely rules the Church or protects the Church or watches over the Church. All of that would be true. But he makes it clear that Jesus is as near as He could possibly be: the Church is His body.

The Church isn't merely an organization associated with Jesus. It's not simply a collection of followers trying to imitate a great teacher. The Church is inseparable from Christ Himself. She receives life from Him, direction from Him, strength from Him. The Head and the body belong together.

Which means that the Ascension couldn't possibly remove Christ from His Church. Quite the opposite. Before the Ascension, Jesus walked visibly in one place at one time according to His earthly ministry. But now the ascended Christ fills all things. He is wherever His Gospel is preached and His Sacraments are administered. He is present with His people throughout the world.

And this is why Jesus would say before His Ascension, "*Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" Not merely, "I will someday return to you." Not merely, "Remember me after I am gone." But: "I am with you." The ascended Lord is near.

He is near in His Word. Near in Baptism. Near in absolution. Near in His Holy Supper. Near to suffering Christians. Near to dying saints. Near to His the Church. As near as the head is to the body.

And this changes how we see the Church itself. The Church doesn't appear glorious in the eyes of the world. She gathers in ordinary buildings with leaky roofs. She sings with imperfect, occasionally off-key voices. She consists of sinners still struggling against sin and weakness. To the world, the Church often appears small and powerless.

And yet Paul says this Church is Christ's body. The place where the ascended Lord chooses to dwell and act. The place where He continues to forgive sins, rescue sinners, and give eternal life. This is where Christ works.

So yes, the preached Word seems weak. Water seems ordinary. Bread and wine seem common. But the ascended Christ works through precisely these things. The Head gives life to His body through the means He Himself has established.

The Church is "*the fullness of him who fills all in all.*" Christ fills all creation with His power and majesty. There is nowhere His reign does not extend. And yet He especially fills His Church with His saving presence and gifts.

The Church possesses the fullness of Christ not because Christians are impressive or holy in themselves, but because Christ gives Himself fully to His people. Where Christ is, there is forgiveness. Where Christ is, there is life. Where Christ is, there is salvation.

And Christ is here. That is the comfort of the Ascension. Your Lord is not absent. The hands once pierced for your transgressions now rule heaven and earth. The voice that cried out from the cross now speaks absolution to sinners. The body laid in the tomb now fills His Church with resurrection life.

And because your Head reigns above all things, nothing can finally destroy His body. Not persecution. Not Satan. Not death itself. If the Head lives, the body must live also.

And the body will live also. The ascended Christ who reigns above all things will raise His people bodily from the grave. His Ascension is not merely His triumph. It is the promise of yours. Where the Head has gone, the body will follow.

And until that day, the ascended Lord remains near to His Church, not merely in a vague memory or a powerless symbol. He is here. He continues to speak, forgive, feed, strengthen, and sustain His people. He rules all things for the good of His Church.

So lift up your eyes. Not so that you can stare into the heavens, wondering with fear and bewilderment where your Savior has gone. Not so that you can stare into the distance and see how far away he is separated from you. Lift up your eyes and look upon this very altar. And see that your Savior is here. Amen.