

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty.

We believe in Jesus Christ...born of Mary...suffered...crucified...died...rose again...he ascended into heaven....

Episcopal priest and writer Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote that *“going to church is one of the strangest things modern people do — gathering week after week to proclaim things we cannot prove about a God we cannot see.”*

I think that is especially true on a day like today, when we celebrate the Ascension.

Several years ago, I led a family service where we looked at pictures of cloud formations and tried to see something familiar in them. Some were obvious. But others were harder to figure out. One person would see something immediately, while someone else could stare at the same picture and see absolutely nothing at all.

And honestly, I think faith can feel a little like that.

Because let's be honest — this is a strange feast day. Jesus blesses his disciples, and then he is taken up into heaven before their eyes??? However, we imagine that scene; it definitely stretches the limits of explanation. It asks something of our imagination. It asks something of our trust.

The disciples are standing there staring upward into the clouds, trying to make sense of what they have just seen. And honestly? I think I would have been staring too. Trying to hold onto the last glimpse. Trying to understand something that probably could not be fully understood.

But perhaps that is part of the point. Faith is not always about certainty. Sometimes it is about learning to trust presence even when we cannot see clearly. Sometimes it is about believing that Christ is still with us, even if not in the ways we expect.

Still, I feel for the disciples. Jesus has spent forty days after the Resurrection teaching them, reassuring them, and helping them regain their footing after all the grief and chaos they have lived through. And now, just as things are beginning to make sense again, he leaves.

Of course, they stood there staring into the sky.

There is something deeply human about looking toward the place where we last experienced someone's presence. Looking for one more glimpse of someone we love.

And then there appear these mysterious figures in white who ask them, *“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”*

In other words: Don't stay frozen here. Don't keep searching for Jesus only in the clouds.

Because the truth of the Ascension is not that Jesus has abandoned them. It is that Christ is no longer confined to one place, one moment, one body moving through history.

Because if Jesus had remained physically present in one place, then only a handful of people could ever be near him at a time. But through the Ascension, and through the Holy Spirit that is about to come at Pentecost, the presence of Christ becomes expansive. Available wherever love and mercy and compassion take root.

Taylor describes it beautifully when she says of the early disciples, *“Whenever two or three of them got together, it was always as if there were someone else in the room with them whom they could not see—the strong, abiding presence of the absent one, as available to them as bread and wine, as familiar to them as each other's faces. It was almost as if he had not ascended but exploded, so that all the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, flew far and wide, so that the seeds of heaven were sown in all the fields of the earth.”*

That is an amazing image. A Jesus explosion! Boom!

And suddenly, the disciples begin to understand that they are no longer simply followers of Jesus. They are now called to embody his presence. To continue his work. To become the Church.

So, the Ascension marks an ending, yes. But it is also a beginning.

The disciples are now living in that in-between place. A place between Jesus' departure and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Between what was and what will be. And as we know, much of our life is lived there, too.

Between fear and courage.

Between planting and harvest.

Between who we have been and who we are still becoming.

And note, disciples do not immediately run out and continue Jesus' work. First, they gather together. They pray, and they wait. They support one another. They prepare themselves for what comes next.

There is wisdom in that for us, too.

Because we live in a world that often feels uncertain and fractured. It can be tempting either to stand frozen, staring at the clouds in bewilderment, or to rush frantically into action without grounding ourselves in prayer, community, and love.

But the early disciples remind us that faithful waiting is not passive. It is active trust. It is staying open to what God is still doing.

And perhaps the Ascension invites us to shift where we look for Christ.

I think maybe the disciples eventually stopped staring at the sky because they began to see Jesus somewhere else — in one another, and in courage they did not yet know they possessed.

Maybe the cloud was never meant to hide Jesus from them, but to teach them to look differently. Not only upward, but outward, and inward too.

I'd like to point out one last thing that might escape our notice. Luke emphasizes what Jesus is doing as he departs. He is blessing his companions. And he promises that he will return in the same way that he left, with blessing.

I find great comfort in that. So often we hear fearful imaginings of how Jesus' return will take place. But it is about blessing. With God, it has always been about blessing.

And we are empowered in Jesus' blessing to be a blessing in the world.

So yes, today we say, "*We believe.*"

Amen.

A Taizé song – In the Lord, I'll be ever thankful

In the Lord, I'll be ever thankful

In the Lord, I will rejoice

Look to God, do not be afraid

Lift up your voices, the Lord is near

Lift up your voices, the Lord is near