

The Seventh Sunday after Easter
May 17, 2026
St. Michael's Church
The Rev. Joshua Wong
Gospel reading: John 17:1-11

Focus: How can we believe in the ascension in modern science?

Function: I am preaching this sermon to my congregation to contemplate how ancient and modern theology can work together in understanding God.

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, you made the universe with all its marvelous order, its atoms, worlds, and galaxies, and the infinite complexity of living creatures: Grant that, as we probe the mysteries of your creation, we may come to know you more truly, and more surely fulfill our role in your eternal purpose. *Amen.*

Today, we find ourselves in the seventh and last Sunday in Eastertide. After his resurrection, Jesus appears often to the disciples during the forty days before his ascension, which we mark today. He speaks about the kingdom of God, equipping them for the future and assuring them that they will receive power.

Every Sunday, in The Nicene Creed, we confess our faith by saying that Jesus "came down" to earth in the incarnation. And now this week Jesus "goes up" to heaven in the ascension. Finally, next Sunday the Holy Spirit will "descend" on the believers at Pentecost.

With all this language about descending and ascending, we need to take an honest look at this ancient religious affirmations of the Christian faith that may seem hard to comprehend in today's modern scientific cosmological knowledge. What do these affirmations mean? How does it make sense to us with our current knowledge of science? Are these meant to be metaphorical or literal, fictional or mythical concepts? Or maybe something altogether different?

In other words, how do these ancient ideas make sense in 2026?

If we think this is hard to comprehend, imagine how difficult it was for the earliest Christians during Jesus' visit on earth. To them, it was hard enough to understand all the miracles Jesus performed, not to mention the resurrection. And now, Jesus says to them that he will be leaving them, but be both present and absent at the same time. It must have required a lot of trust and faith, and it still does for us today. Hence, this is why God sent us the Holy Spirit to assure our faith and to guide us into the truth until his return.

Oxford theologian and Anglican priest Keith Ward in his book *The Big Questions in Science and Religion*, speaks about exactly this—the clash of ancient and modern cosmologies that we experience with the ascension story.

He writes: "We *now* know through science that, if Jesus began ascending two thousand years ago, he would not yet have left the Milky Way, unless he attained warp speed." To state the obvious, our ideas today about space and time are different from those in Biblical days which were written about 2,000 years ago. For instance, Paul described a three-tier universe in Philippians 2:10: "in heaven and on earth and under the earth." Ward continues to say, "Today, it's tempting to discount this outmoded cosmology of Jesus's day by contrasting it with the updated cosmologies of contemporary physics. But what will today's cosmologies look like two thousand years from now? Or even a mere hundred years from now?"

The point here is that scientific discoveries continue to explore faster than ever, not only in space but in other scientific research such as information technology and medical advancement. For example, our generation recently witnessed the Artemis II flight to the moon. In our time in history, no human has ever traveled so far as we have just witnessed. Astrophysicists agree that it is misleading to privilege any

cosmology, whether it happened 2,000 years ago or in our modern times as a fixed and final view of the world for all time. That's just understood in science.

Father Keith adds, “The ascension of Jesus was described within the context of the imperfect cosmology of his day, which has since been supplanted by our own imperfect cosmology. I **don't** believe that Jesus ascended "up" in the sense of how we think of cosmology today, but I do believe that Jesus literally exists in another dimension that is best described symbolically or metaphorically.”

The Christian philosopher and theologian Stephen Davis of Claremont McKenna College puts it this way: "I **do not** believe that in the Ascension Jesus went up, kept going until he achieved escape velocity from the earth, and then kept moving until he got to heaven, as if heaven were located somewhere in space. The Ascension of Jesus was primarily a change of state rather than a change of location. Jesus changed in the Ascension from being present in the realm of space and time to being present in the realm of eternity, in the transcendent heavenly realm.”

You may recall in today's First reading in Acts, when the apostles had come together, right before the Ascension, Jesus says, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." It's as if Jesus was saying to the disciples, "I'm keeping some secret from you, because your perspective is too small." When I think about how our cosmic understanding of both time and space has transformed drastically since Jesus spoke these words, I feel even more how infinitesimal our human experience is. Where we lie in the history of the earth. But we have never been alone in trying to understand the ideas about space and time. Throughout the centuries, many have grappled with the uncertainties inherent in a religion as linear as Christianity. I think of the prophetic inaccuracies of Christopher Columbus and Isaac Newton. Not to mention the many cults that have tried to predict the second coming of Christ.

The disciples are then advised — we might even say admonished — to set aside any grandiose vision of their own role about space and time. Instead, the following verse goes on to say, "and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." Then Jesus ascended. After his ascension, the disciples continued Jesus' work as witnesses, going out on the streets and into the lives of ordinary people to tell the

story about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It continues today, this story is for the whole earth.

Reading Acts, we are reminded that we may never fully understand God's concepts about space and time, but what does matter is that each of us matters to God because we are loved. And he promises to return.

Today in 2026, it is important to ask these questions in order for us to make sense of the ancient and the modern. To rethink our beliefs about where heaven is, how it looks like, and the image of God literally sitting in the right hand of God in heaven. I am very careful to teach these concepts of heaven and God in our Children's worship, so they have less influence in what we have been taught about where heaven is or looks like. I think our understanding of cosmos goes beyond our human understanding of God, and creation. Even for the earliest Jews in the Hebrew Bible, God was holy and incomprehensible in human thought. God's name was so sacred, so revered, that they were forbidden to even refer to God as Yahweh, which means, "He Brings into Existence Whatever Exists," or "I AM WHO I AM," often substituting it with the name, "Adonai" ("My Lord") or "Hashem" ("The Name").

For us today, our finite language about the ascension, limited by every cosmology of every age, is necessarily symbolic and metaphorical. It affirms literal realities that are infinite, and therefore ultimately indescribable.

These discussions about the intersection of how the ancient and the modern interpretation of theology, the discussion of understanding truths with both our physical and spiritual eyes is necessary.

In the Episcopal faith tradition, we describe ourselves as being supported by a three-legged stool. Each of those legs support us in being a church that upholds ancient traditions without being set in stone.

The first leg is Scripture, which we draw on continually, even when the Scriptures challenge us. Instead of centering our worship on modern writings or poetry, our worship is centered in readings from the Bible — stories that were written very long ago when the world was very different from our own. We look to these stories to deepen our faith and understanding, just like generations before have done. We find deep and nourishing value in this practice and connection.

The second leg is Tradition. There is much in the Episcopal church that is traditional, particularly in the shaping of our liturgies, which always follow the same form even when the words are different or updated. We honor the church's sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, and re-affirm our baptismal covenant a number of times each year. And we honor the Episcopal Constitutions and Canons which govern the way we make decisions as a communion. We honor many more recent traditions, also, because we know how important ritual is for the human soul.

The third leg is our reason (and experience) as 21st century people. Even though we don't see smart phones, climate change or self driving cars discussed in either Scripture or tradition, we nonetheless interact with Scripture and tradition through modern minds and lives, viewing them as being in conversation with each other. We do not see our faith in a static or black and white way, but rather as a source of ever new meaning in God's living word and through this structure of living stones we call the church.

Our understanding of heaven may be different from what was written in the Bible, but as we continue in our journey of faith, the Holy Spirit will help us seek for

answers to where the mystical meets the pavement. Often it will be a mystery, it will take time. But it will always remind us of God's love for the human race. We may not know how and when Jesus will return, but the good news is that all will be healed, the planet will be healed, our physical bodies will be healed. May the Divine find us faithful, living in joy and hope among all we will still marvelously discover. Amen.