

Scripture:

Luke 24:44-53 (NRSV)

Volunteer

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Christmas and [Easter](#)—the two Christian-centered holidays that believers and non-believers alike can never forget. Whether it's the church bulletin's advertisements for the upcoming children's play or Macy's reminding you to snag the perfect holiday attire, you can't ignore Christmas and Easter.

But what about Ascension Day, the day celebrated 40 days after Easter, focusing solely on Christ's resurrection? [Christianity.com](#) reveals that Ascension Day shifts our focus from Christ as a humble servant and calls us to worship Jesus as the risen and victorious. It's as if we were called to remember Immanuel, God with Us, then Jesus as a human, who walked and talked and lived and breathed in our flesh. Now we are called not to forget that first vision but also to envision Jesus as God. After all, such is the mystery of Christ; both God and human. It's as if Easter and Ascension Day share the same mission: to reveal beautiful secrets of humanity and divinity in the Jesus-way.

Furthermore, Ascension Day calls us to rejoice in the great Comforter, the [Holy Spirit](#), whom Christ gifted to humankind after ascending to be with the God. We often place the Holy Spirit on the backburner, as if this aspect of the Eternal one is the bronze medalist of the Trinity. But in doing so, we lose sight of the glorious truth nestled in the verse reveals that “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). Yet, following Christ's ascension, the Holy Spirit fulfills the role of Immanuel, ensuring that the presence of God and the love and peace of Jesus the Christ will forever rest on a weary world, whispering encouragement and healing to the believer's heart. The Holy Spirit is God with us, promising a presence that will never be taken, come what may on this side of heaven.

Though there are no Ascension Day "rules" hidden in the Bible, I believe this celebration compels us to fulfill the Great Commission. [Matthew 28:18-19](#) displays the ultimate calling of the believer: "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name

of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Imagine what would have happened had Jesus *not* left Earth.

Christianity likely would not have spread, for it was the belief that Christ was no longer on Earth that decentralized Christianity, challenging it to adopt and adapt to other lands and languages.

Ascension Day is a celebration of Jesus' ascension into heaven after his death. Most people — including many Christians — are unaware of this holy day. But it helps explain the birth of the church, and the early church's missionary zeal and character.

The first disciples claimed that Jesus vanished after 40 days of meeting with them. This inaugurated the first missionary movement in history. Prior to the early Christians, no adherents had left their land and language to convince foreigners of the universality of their faith. Religion was an ethnic expression. Every city had their patron God. No one felt the need to take their god to other cities except for safe travels

This would have been the fate of Christianity, too, if not for Jesus' ascension. Ascension took away the temptation of the first disciples to claim a central location and language. Lamin Sanneh, a professor of missions and world Christianity at Yale Divinity School, points out that Christianity adapted through multiple cultural and historical contexts because it was detached from a geographical center.

This rapid adaptation manifests in the Christian Scriptures. The Jewish Bible is mostly in Hebrew, the language of the Jewish patriarchs; the Quran was scripted in Arabic, Muhammed's mother tongue. But the Gospels were written in Koine (*pronounced Kozney*), (simple) Greek, though Jesus taught in Aramaic.

The original Scripture of Christ is a translation. The essence of Christianity is to be in constant translation and, thus, ascend to the call of Christ!

It is the nature of any organization to centralize. Often this is done through connecting a land and/or a language to its founder — the leader's birth and burial places often become holy grounds requiring pilgrimage. This is an ingenious form of message control.

The Jewish people made a treacherous journey three times a year and Muslims are called to make pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, Muhammed's birthplace and sites of ministry. Land and language are powerful cohesives for these religions.

But the strong affirmation of Christ's absence kept the early church from centralizing around Jerusalem. Without the body of Jesus to create a memorial, no land or language could monopolize a claim to sacredness. Ascension, in one sense, is an abdication of worldly authority. It is the empowerment of everyone, no matter what their land and language.

What followed was predictable. With the elevation of Rome, Christianity had land and a language that became more sacred than any other. Christians began to worship only in Latin any other version of Scripture other became sacrilegious.

Ascension Day offers an antidote to Christian exceptionalism. To avoid this instinct of exceptionalism, we celebrate Ascension Day with the same energy and creativity as we celebrate Christmas and Easter. The church declares that Christ is not here because every culture is tempted to make themselves the presence of Christ on Earth. And it's the reason why I move the celebration to a Sunday, as we do not meet on the actual Ascension Day, which is 10 days prior to Pentecost (next Sunday), if you are keeping your liturgical calendars in order.

The history of American Christianity is no exception in this itch for exceptionalism. America's foreign policy has always been tinged with religious zeal because America sees itself as the "city on a hill," with a "Manifest Destiny" to conquer and spread democracy as its divine prerogative.

I believe that American Christianity needs to drop the delusion that America is the “city on the hill,” and learn to listen to other nation’s Christians. When we begin to see the significance of every land and every language and understand that Christ is not here in America any more than anywhere else, we can be cured of exceptionalism and begin to ascend to the universal call that God’s voice, Jesus’ presence, and the Holy Spirit’s support encourages us.

The church can serve as a prophetic voice by celebrating Ascension Day — a day that says there is no land or language that is exceptional; a day that calls us to ascend from all places and times.

Christ is not here. Christ is everywhere. In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ promises, “Where two or more are gathered, I will be there.” A Christ, who is on Earth, cannot make that promise. A Christ absent in Jerusalem can promise to be everywhere. Let us ascend to the call of Love universal. Amen!