

Sermon: Down to earth Ascension

It is very easy on Ascension Day to get caught up in the high theology and the spiritual realms of heaven — to find ourselves thinking about clouds, glory, heavenly thrones, and the Holy Spirit descending in power. All of that is true and beautiful, but it can also leave us standing still, staring upwards, wondering what on earth — or indeed what in heaven — it's all about. And the danger is that it slips through our minds and hearts without touching the ground of our lives.

But Ascension, at its very best, is not a “going to heaven” story. It is a down-to-earth story — a story that resonates for us on the ground in Shirley today. Because Ascension is not about Jesus leaving us; it is about Jesus sending us. It is not about absence; it is about identity. And that identity is summed up in one word: witnesses.

Witnesses

The first thing the Ascension stories give the Church — and by “the Church” I mean the people, the gathered disciples, the congregations who meet faithfully in one place — is a sense of identity. Jesus says to us, “You will be my witnesses.”

Its not a task, its a promise.

Jesus is saying: *“This is who you are now. My presence in the world. My story in your lives. My compassion in your hands.”*

That's the vision. And it is wonderfully ordinary.

Witnessing is not about standing on street corners with leaflets. It is not about having all the answers. It is not about being perfect. It

Ascension Day
Acts 1: 1-11; Ephesians 1: 15-end & Luke 24: 44-end.
14 May 2026 Holy Communion St James

is about living in such a way that Christ's life, Christ's hope, Christ's kindness, Christ's truth will shine through us.

How we witness

And Ascension shows us that this witness happens in different ways.

The buildings of St James and St John stand as visible signs of Christian presence. They witness simply by being here — open, welcoming, prayerful spaces in the heart of the parish. They say to the community: *“God has not left. God is here.”*

The congregation — you and me — are the living witness. In worship, in fellowship, in service, in kindness, in the way we welcome newcomers, in the way you pray for one another, in the way we support the vulnerable. Every Sunday, simply by gathering, we witness to the risen and ascended Christ.

But this is where Ascension really lands. The disciples are sent *out*, not kept *in*. And so are we. Our witness happens in the places we already are — in homes, workplaces, supermarkets, schools, care homes, parks, cafés, and conversations. In the ordinary moments of everyday life.

Ascension tells us that Christ is not confined to the sanctuary. He is present in Shirley — and he sends us to join him there.

When we witness

Ascension also teaches us not just *how* to witness, but *when*.

In one sense, the answer is simple: now. The angels say to the disciples, “Why are you standing looking up?” In other words: *“Don't get stuck here. There's work to do.”*

Ascension Day
Acts 1: 1-11; Ephesians 1: 15-end & Luke 24: 44-end.
14 May 2026 Holy Communion St James

But in another sense, the answer is: **not yet**. Because Jesus also tells them to **wait** — to wait for the Holy Spirit, who will empower them to do what they cannot do alone.

And that is our rhythm too.

We are called to witness — to add to our numbers, to teach the faith, to offer ourselves in loving service, to challenge injustice, to care for creation — the Five Marks of Mission, our job description as the Church.

But we cannot do any of this without prayer, without Scripture, without gathering, without being nourished by God. We live in a society that desperately needs people of prayer, people of goodness, people of hope — and we cannot be those people unless we are rooted in Christ.

Not just us

When we look at the world as it is, witnessing feels huge. And it is. But that does not mean we can shirk it.

There are three reasons for that.

First: we have the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who empowered the disciples empowers us. The Spirit who gave them courage, compassion, and clarity gives those gifts to us too.

Secondly, we have each other. As I said on Sunday – we are a gift to each other so that we can encourage, embolden, and inspire each other.

Lastly: Christ is reigning — now. This is the heart of Ascension and Ephesians.

Ascension Day
Acts 1: 1-11; Ephesians 1: 15-end & Luke 24: 44-end.
14 May 2026 Holy Communion St James

St Paul tells us that Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, reigning over all powers and authorities, filling all things, and that the Church — us — is his body, the way he is present in the world.

I'll be honest: when I look at the world, it doesn't always feel like Christ is in charge. But when I stop, when I pray, when I look at the goodness that still shines through people, when I see the beauty of creation, when I witness acts of kindness and courage — I begin to understand the hope Paul speaks of. The “glorious inheritance” we are called into.

And that hope gives me what I need to carry on. And it gives us what we need to carry on.

Sending out

So today, Ascension Day, we remember who we are: **witnesses**.

Not spectators. Not bystanders. Not people staring into the sky. But people sent into the world with hope, with purpose, and with the Spirit's power.

May Christ, who reigns over all things, fill us with his courage, steady us with his peace, and send us out as his witnesses in Shirley — in our homes, our workplaces, our conversations, our everyday lives — that others may glimpse his love and hope through us. Amen.

Rev'd Richard Haynes Ascension Day 14 May 2026