

Sunday Morning Worship Sermon, June 1, 2025

"What is Ascension?" Pastor Takaaki Inoue

Acts 1:3-11, Mark 16:15-20

### ① 【Seated at the right hand of God = The King has returned】

Today is the Feast of the Ascension in the Christian calendar. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples for 40 days to prove that he was alive, and then ascended into heaven. This is called the Ascension. At funerals, we also say "Ascension," but the kanji for "Ascension" is different. The word "Ascension" refers to Christ's return to the throne of God, where He originally resided.

In the Acts of the Apostles, "Jesus was lifted up into heaven as the disciples looked on, but was hidden from their sight by a cloud." (Acts 1:10), and in the Gospel of Mark, "After He had spoken to His disciples, He was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19). (Mark 16:19), and in the Apostles' Creed, it is confessed that "He ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. This is the Church's confession of faith, since no one has ever seen Jesus seated at the right hand of God. The fact that Jesus sat at the right hand of God means that He is God of the same nature as God the Father, and His sitting at the right hand of God means that He is the King of Heaven to whom is entrusted the full authority of judgment.

Originally, Christ was the Son of God, so He is the heavenly one. He lived temporarily on earth for 33 years, but after accomplishing salvation on earth, He returned to His old home. That is why "the door of the Kingdom of God" has opened. Welcome home! and angels and saints welcomed the triumphant Christ. The King has returned. The King has returned. The Psalmist also says, "Lift up your heads, O city gates! Arise, ye gates of yore! For the glorious King is coming" (Ps. 24:7). (Psalm 24:7). The same is true for us. We do not go to heaven as a remainder because earth has ended, but we are sent from heaven to earth and back again to heaven. You return men to the dust, says the Lord, "Return, O Son of Man!" (Psalm 90:3). Earth is a temporary dwelling, and when our work is done, we will return to heaven. For "our home is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20).

### ② 【Through the Incarnation, the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Ascension, all of humanity was saved】

The Ascension is not merely a celebration of Christ returning to the right hand of God, where He originally resided. He brought back to heaven the human body that had become one with Himself. That is you. The Ascension teaches us that

it is the final act of Christ's salvation. Some people say, "We are saved by the Cross," but that is only part of salvation. It is through the entire process of Christ's Incarnation (Christmas), Cross, Resurrection, and Ascension that all humanity is saved. The Incarnation marks the beginning of salvation, the Cross removes sin, the Resurrection removes death, and the Ascension elevates humanity to heaven, thereby completing the salvation of humanity. This unity of mystery completes human salvation. God unites Himself with humanity, becoming one with humanity. He experiences the same things as humans, from birth to death, takes them upon Himself, and heals them within Himself. Therefore, we are saved through the series of Christ's works: the Nativity, the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. This is the traditional teaching of the Church. It was through Christ that the human body first ascended to heaven. No one had ever ascended to heaven before. Many people think that when we die, all human souls are lifted up to heaven, but we cannot ascend to heaven by our own strength. However, we are to become one with the One who has come down, that is, Christ, and be carried firmly on His shoulders, embraced in His arms, and taken by Him into the Kingdom of God.

●Gregory of Nyssa, who lived in the 4th century, said, "The good shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep, came to the lost sheep... He found the lost sheep, carried it on his shoulders, which later bore the cross, and led it to eternal life."

### **③ [Christ is still with you in the body of the church]**

The angel said to the disciples. Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven? Jesus, who was taken away from you and lifted up to heaven, will come again in the same manner as you saw him go into heaven." (v. 11) "Why" is a strange question. Jesus has gone away and we say, "Oh Lord, He has gone away from us. We are all alone." So we looked up forlornly. But with the words, "Why are you looking up to heaven? They seem to be telling us to believe in the future, to look not only to the heavens but also to the earth. The angel told the disciples, "Jesus is far away from you. The angel said to the disciples, "Do not be sad that Jesus has gone away from you. He will return and be with you, though you cannot see Him. This is also what Jesus himself said to his disciples. I will be with you always, even to the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20).

●Augustine of the 4th century said this: "When the Lord came down to us, He did not leave heaven, and when He ascended back to heaven, He did not withdraw from us."

He is with us, but His presence has changed. He used to be with us in “physical form,” but now He is with us in “the form of the church. Since Jesus is God, He is now working in the body of the church, just as a physical body was necessary for Him to work on earth. When you come to church, there is everything you need to remember Christ. Therefore, when we come to church, we must think that Christ is here.

●The other day, I visited Tokushōji Temple, a Jōdo Shinshū Otani sect temple located in Kawaramachi, Kyoto. Inside the temple, there is a room called the inner sanctuary where Buddhist statues are placed, located at the back. In front of it is the outer sanctuary, where believers sit. The inner sanctuary is said to be similar to the Golden Hall of Todaiji Temple. At Todaiji Temple, the Great Buddha is placed at the center, with the Four Heavenly Kings, the Twelve Guardian Generals, and statues of Kannon and others lined up around it, leaving only a small space for humans to enter. This is because the Golden Hall represents the “world of the Pure Land,” or heaven. The temple is where the world of the Pure Land and the world of humans (the world of suffering) come together as one. Between the inner sanctuary and the outer sanctuary is a pattern of waves. This symbolizes that the shore of heaven and the sea of this world are one and connected. Heaven is called the “other shore,” and this world is called the “this shore.” People encounter the Buddha at this shoreline. In the inner room, there is a hanging scroll, and when there are no Buddha statues, people used to pray in front of this scroll. It reads, “Namu Fushigi Hikari Nyorai,” meaning, “I believe in the Buddha of the mysterious light.” It is said that the Buddha appears as a mysterious light.

This is exactly the same as Christianity, which surprised me. Shinran's teachings are essentially the same as Christianity. They teach that even sinners can be saved. There must be some connection between them.

Heaven is not a distant world. Heaven and this world are connected, and the church is the place where heaven and this world meet, where God meets people. Heaven and earth are mysteriously united in Christ. Christ himself is “heaven.” Since we cannot go to heaven, the One who is heaven came down from heaven to earth for us. And He will remain with us until the end of the world. The church has the “gate of heaven.” It is open to everyone. The church is the place where those belonging to the earth are lifted up to heaven, where you are deified and Christified. It is the place that catches us as we fall and lifts us up to heaven.

●When I was in seminary a long time ago, I couldn't help but sin, so I went to my teacher for advice. The teacher told me, "You have the hand of Christ under you. Even if you sin and fall, you will fall on the hand of Christ. You can rest assured that you will not fall any further. Whenever I receive Holy Communion, I always feel thankful, "Oh, how dare Christ come down to such a sinner!"

Today, too, Christ receives you and lifts you up. Let us be thankful for that.