

Sunday, May 17, 2026 Ascension Sunday Sermon

“At the Right Hand of God the Father” Pastor Takaaki Inoue

Acts 1:3–11, Mark 16:14–20

① **【seated at the right hand of God】**

Today is the Feast of the Ascension. After appearing to His disciples for 40 days following His resurrection and proving that He was alive, Jesus ascended into heaven. This is called the Ascension. Although the term “calling to heaven” is also used in funerals, the characters are different. “Calling to heaven” refers to death, whereas “Ascension” refers to Christ returning to heaven, where He originally resided. The Book of Acts states, “While the disciples were watching, Jesus was taken up into heaven, and a cloud hid him from their sight” (Acts 1:10). Since clouds have long been regarded as God’s vehicle, in icons he is depicted being carried by angels instead of on a cloud.

The Gospel of Mark states, “After the Lord Jesus had spoken to his disciples, he was taken up into heaven and sat at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19), and on the day of Pentecost, Peter preached to the crowd, “Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God and received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, whom he has poured out upon us.” (Acts 2:33). Thus, the confession that Jesus took his seat at the right hand of God was made within the Church from very early on. However, since no one actually saw this happen, it is a confession of the church’s faith, and eventually the phrase “ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty” was included in the Apostles’ Creed. The fact that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God signifies that He is God of the same essence as God the Father, and that His seating at God’s right hand means He is the King to whom full authority over judgment has been entrusted.

●John of Damascus, writing in the 7th century, states: “We believe that Christ sits at the right hand of the Father, but we do not think of the Father’s right hand as a place (space). How could the One who is unlimited possess a right hand that is limited as a space? Right and left belong to limited things. We understand the Father’s right hand to signify God’s glory and honor. There, the Son of God—who has existed as God from before the world, shares the same essence as the Father, and became flesh at the end of the world—sits in the flesh, and that flesh shares in the glory. Christ, together with that flesh, receives worship from all creation.”

When you look at many religious paintings depicting the Ascension, you can see that they are trying to convey the idea that “Christ is God.”

② **【The Whole Human Race Was Saved Through the Incarnation, the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Ascension】**

The Ascension teaches us that it is the final act of Christ’s salvation. When Christ

came down, He was only divine, but when He ascended, He was accompanied by His humanity. When He came down, He was one, but when He ascended, He was two (yet one). People often say, “I was saved by the Cross,” but that is only a part of salvation. It is through the entire process—Christ’s Incarnation (Christmas), the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Ascension—that the whole of humanity is saved. Christ’s Incarnation was the beginning of salvation; the Cross removed sin; the Resurrection removed death; and the Ascension raised humanity to heaven, thereby fully completing human salvation. God experienced everything from human birth to death in the same way, took it upon Himself, and healed it within Himself. Human salvation is completed through this one mystery. This is the traditional teaching of the Church.

It was through Christ that the human body ascended to heaven for the first time. Until then, no one had been able to ascend to heaven. Many people believe that when a person dies, their soul is lifted up to heaven, but humans cannot ascend to heaven by their own power. However, if we become one with the One who descended—that is, with Christ—we can ascend to heaven through Him. Paul writes: “Even when we were dead in our sins, he made us alive together with Christ... and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:5–6) The word “together” appears three times here. It is written that we have been raised with Christ and seated with Him on heavenly thrones. It is not saying that we will eventually be raised or eventually seated on heavenly thrones, but that this has already been accomplished. This is because we are one with Christ. For a human to sit at the right hand of God means that divinity is imparted to humanity—a process known as theosis. Through Christ, humanity and God have been made one; fellowship has been fully restored, and the distance between us has been brought incredibly close.

● The other day, while reading a book on church architecture, I learned something interesting. Catholic churches are built with tall towers and high ceilings. This style is known as Gothic architecture. By contrast, Byzantine churches are characterized by a dome-shaped ceiling that curves to envelop the entire building. This clearly reflects the theological differences between the two traditions. In the Orthodox Church, the belief is that heaven has descended to earth and that heaven and earth have been united in Christ; therefore, the architecture is designed to make heaven feel close at hand.

I was reminded of something a seminary professor once said back when the pandemic had driven people apart: “People feel happy when they are close to one another, but not when they are far apart.” When we work together, eat together, and talk together, we feel a sense of security. God came down from heaven, drew near to the earth, and became one with it. Let us give thanks for God’s kindness in drawing near to us.

③ 【Christ is still with you through the body of the Church】

The angels said to the disciples, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you saw him go into heaven.” (Verse 11) “Why?” is a strange question. They were looking up into the sky, feeling lonely because Jesus had left. However, by asking, “Why are you standing here looking up at the sky?” the angels are saying, “Look at the earth, not the sky.” The angel wanted to say this: “Do not grieve because Jesus has gone away. Although Jesus is invisible to the eye, He is with you.” This is also what Jesus Himself told His disciples: “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

●Augustine of Hippo, writing in the 4th century, said this:

“When the Lord came down to us, He did not leave heaven, and when He ascended into heaven again, He did not withdraw Himself from us.”

He is still with us, but the nature of His presence has changed. Until now, He was with us in “physical form,” but from now on, He will be with us in the “form of the church.” When I say “church,” I do not mean a building. The church is worship; it is God’s Word and the Lord’s Supper; it is a holy life in Christ; it is fellowship in the Holy Spirit and love; and it is the believers who are the body of Christ. How much have I been helped by the church and the people connected to it—pastors and believers alike? I believe that Christ, through the bodies of these people, has loved me, helped me, and been with me. Who could possibly gather such people together? I cannot imagine anyone other than God. When I view all the believers as an extension of Christ, this becomes very clear.

●A female college student reportedly spoke of a certain priest, saying, “He’s so warm. How can I put it? He’s humble, and he accepts everyone just as they are.” Sister Kazuko Watanabe later commented, “I believe priests and religious should exist as professionals who, through their gaze, smile, words, and demeanor, ‘It’s okay for you to be alive. Please keep living.’ I believe they should exist as professionals who convey this message. Today, there is still a need for priests and religious to live as people who bear witness to the presence of the Lord’s peace—a peace different from the peace the world offers—as those who are in this world yet not of it.”

The other day, the diocesan assembly was held at the Catholic Tamatsukuri Cathedral, and Father Nuno Lima, the parish priest, gave the opening remarks. Since I know him, I went to his room to say hello, and Father Nuno came out with a smile on his face. When I saw the suit he was wearing over his colored shirt, I must admit it looked like a well-worn suit that wasn’t particularly high-quality. Since he is the pastor of the cathedral, I thought he could have worn nicer clothes, but I was surprised by how modest he was. He is always smiling, and I respected

him for being such a humble person.

I, too, wish to be someone who, while living in this world, allows people to sense the fragrance of heaven. Christ came to make me, who am of the earth, heavenly. Though this is not yet complete, it has already begun within me. The fragrance of Christ is the fragrance of heaven. I hope that by my very presence, people may sense the fragrance of Christ, the fragrance of heaven. For that reason, I wish to live a monastic life.