

Sunday Sermon May 17, 2026

Easter 7A, Sunday after the Ascension

St. Michael's and All Angels, Sanibel

Gail Avery

Acts 1:6-14; Ps 68:1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

May 17, 2026

This week while in New Hampshire, I saw an amazing thing...and as I watched it unfold, I found myself praying...for a Mamma Duck and her duckling crossing Interstate route 16 in Portsmouth near a busy mall in the middle of the day...There was a lot of traffic...I didn't think they had a chance—8 lanes total, 4 on the north, 4 on the south.

There she was with 7 ducklings, all trailing behind in single file. ...She wasn't just going straight across the road at 90 degrees...she moved this way and that way to avoid cars...And as she zigged and zagged, her ducklings zigged and zagged...all in line—not one duckling outrunning another...each staying in their assigned position.

“Make way for ducklings.” And miraculously all the trucks and cars did.

Later I wondered what had given Mamma Duck the courage to cross the road at that hour?

- And was the order of the ducklings pre-determined?
- How did they know to stay in line?
- Did the Mamma Duck assign the first to follow her, then the next, and the next and the next...all the way—to the last duckling, picking up the rear?

(I know my children would have pushed their sibs aside, especially if they had sensed that they were in danger...come to think of it, they always want to be in the front of any line.)

- No one scattered...How did they all have courage to perform the crossing?

Courage: is the state or quality of mind or Spirit that enables one to face danger with self-confidence and resolution; bravery; valor. It's a derivative from the Latin word *cor*—meaning heart.

Core: is the innermost or most important part of anything; one's heart; one's center; one's essence.

The verb: *Hearten* means —to give strength or hope to, to encourage; to cheer. And I gotta tell you, I was cheering those ducklings along

At the *core* of Jesus' life is God—to whom he dedicates his life and prayers. And he gives us the Holy Spirit to *hearten* us.

Our gospel reading today, we go back in time to Holy Week. Mark, Matthew and Luke, all recall an agonizing prayer of Jesus' last night in the garden of Gethsemane. Yet today, we hear a different sort of prayer coming from Jesus—that's only recorded in John's gospel. Instead of crying out to God to stop his suffering, in John's Gospel Jesus directs his gaze to heaven, and we overhear him praying for his disciples.

“I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Last week we overheard Jesus promises to his disciples that an *Advocate* will come—the same Spirit that takes Jesus to God that we witness in our first reading as Jesus ascends into heaven to be with God.

The disciples are no longer under the care of Jesus, but if they believe in his words, they will soon be under the care of the Holy Spirit.

Today is the first Sunday after the feast of the Ascension which was last Thursday—the day in our Church calendar that we celebrate our Lord's departure into heaven. It marks the end of Jesus's earthly presence and prepares the way for the birth of the Church at Pentecost (which we'll celebrate next week)—the day when Jesus breathes his Spirit into his disciples.

As recorded at the end of Luke's Gospel and again in the Book of Acts—after assuring his disciples of his continuing and abiding presence—Jesus was separated from them and taken up into a cloud. And we heard in our first reading today, that two men in white robes stood by and asked the disciples, “Why are you standing looking toward heaven? This Jesus, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven...

So, the disciples turn their focus to Jerusalem—and go back to the room upstairs—where they devote themselves to prayer and wait for the Holy Spirit” to come upon them. as Jesus promised.

They traveled *a Sabbath day journey away* which is only about a 1/2 mile, but I'm sure they too had to zig and zag their way back to Jerusalem to avoid Roman officials.

All of Jesus' ducklings are there—Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. Though frightened that their Lord has left them again, they don't scatter. They all agree they are in this for good, completely together in prayer—the women included. Also, Jesus' mother, Mary, and Jesus' brothers. (Yes, John's Gospel reports that Jesus had brothers!)

From Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God will emanate to the ends of the earth and before they set forth on their journeys, they pray...

In both of these lessons [The first lesson from Acts and John's Gospel], Jesus' *disciples* are no longer in training. They have finished their schooling—they're now graduates who are ready to work *in* the world, picking up where Jesus has left off. In both of these lessons, praying to God is essential before any action is taken.

An intercessory prayer by a member of *The Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross* states that prayer can make

- A sour heart sweet
- A sad heart brave
- A sick heart well
- A blind heart full of sight
- A cold heart ardent.

It draws the great God down into our hearts. And it drives our hungry souls up to the fullness of God.

I wonder if Mamma Duck prayed before taking action or does the rest of God's created order just know what's at their *core*—giving them strength, hope and encouragement and good cheer.

This past week, I prayed and prayed before I took action, waiting patiently for the Spirit to give me direction.

My time in NH, over these past couple of weeks, was well-planned out. One might say even predictable... I was to care for grandchildren and to bury a dear friend. Her brother Jim had asked me to officiate at her burial.

The day we pick, was Friday May 8th— Carol’s birthday!

On May 8, 1953, Carol Ann McCauley was brought into the world. 73 years later she was returned *to* the earth. And it would be the first time in 52 years that I haven’t spoken to Carol on her birthday—in person or by phone.

Then the unfathomable happened.

Her brother Jim died unexpectedly the day before Carol’s service due to a simple surgery gone wrong. The doctor had inadvertently stapled a major artery—causing loss of blood to organs. Jim was airlifted to Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and after two emergency surgeries, the doctors at MGH recommended the family to gather. Life support was removed. Jim peacefully died; surrounded by his wife, son James and his fiancé Erin who will be married next Saturday, and their newly engaged daughter Katie and her fiancé.

Looking up to heaven, my prayer was simple. “Oh, God, please give me the right words.”

The family, despite their shock, despite their grief, courageously decided to go forward with Carol’s burial. Their strength and grace were otherworldly. It could only be of God. And at the burial I had this palpable sense that Carol’s love was flowing out of us...enveloping the grieving family.

Heaven was coming down to earth. Carol’s spirit was there, creating what the ancient celts call ‘thin places’ where heaven and earth meet.

I don’t remember where I read this or who is its author... but the person noted that

“Heaven—as depicted in the Bible—is not usually ‘up there’ but coming towards us. I’m not just referring to a geographical locale here. It’s not about the direction to heaven, but our proximity to it. Nor does the Bible usually depict heaven as being way off, anywhere terribly removed from us. Instead, it is always approaching us, drawing near to us, breaking into our work or taking root and growing, often in ways impossible for us to perceive. So, when Jesus ‘departs’ to heaven, he is not in some distant locale, but in a place that is constantly drawing near to us.

Jesus's ascension is not telling us how Jesus came to be so absent from the disciples (and now us), but how he came to be *everywhere* present and *everywhere* approaching instead of confined to one location at a time. The heaven that Jesus has entered is not far off beyond the remotest galaxy. Heaven is here—God's love is here and alive, breaking *into* our present reality, and Jesus is in the midst of that, constantly drawing near, constantly reaching out to us.”

I love this imagery...and it's perhaps what I felt at Carol's burial. Heaven, through our love for Carol and Carol's love for us was coming towards us. Her spirit was there.

I saw Jesus, in Carol's friends comforting Jim's family and her sister Janet and Janet's family. And in the Mamma Duck that courageously crossed those busy lanes, encouraging her ducklings to follow, which I believe is the good news of our lessons today.

If we want to keep our eyes on Jesus, we need to be looking for him in the people and events, and God's creation all around us, not in some heaven beyond the sky.

In fact, it is said that if you wish to understand our Creator, you first have to understand His creation.

In closing, I like to share a prayer read at Carol's service from James E. Miller's book, *Winter Grief, Summer Grace*, which Jim's family found comforting. I believe it also reflects the essence of Jesus' ascension.

However painful it is to bid farewell to one who has died,
once you have done so, you can begin a new relationship
with them, one you can always cherish.

Once you release them from earthly time,
you can embrace them in eternity.

When you release them from the physical dimension,
You can hold them close in a dimension no less real:
the spiritual one.

For, even though they no longer walk beside you,
they will be even closer,
They will be *within* you.

And you will not forget them, because you cannot forget them.
They will be as near to you as your breathing,

and as much a part of you as your own dreaming.
They will exist *in* you as love.

Love—it's all about creating more Love in the world—including a Mamma Duck's love for her ducklings, the 7 courageous ducklings that did not scatter. *Amen*