

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 3, 2026

Text: Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60

*“Jesus Reigns”*

The book of Acts opens with Jesus’ ascension into heaven. A cloud hides Him from the eyes of the disciples, and He is gone. Gone? No, Jesus did not leave the disciples to fend for themselves like orphans in the world. The cloud that hid Jesus from sight was also a sign promising Jesus’ presence. In Ancient Israel, God signalled His presence with His people with the appearance a bright cloud. On their journey to the Promised Land, it rested in the middle of Israel’s camp, over the holiest part of the Tent for His worship. Once Israel had taken the land, the cloud of God’s glory still abided over the Tent. When the Temple was built in Jerusalem, again the same cloud rested over the Holy Place. For Israel, the cloud always bore witness to God, their ever-present King.

As the disciples watched Jesus pass into the cloud above them, they were reminded of two divine promises. The first they had heard from Jesus, who promised to send the Holy Spirit to empower them to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8). The Spirit was coming to be God-with-them all. The second promise came to them from the two angels that appeared as the disciples watched Jesus ascend beyond their sight: *“This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”* (Acts 1:11) Combined, these promises assured the disciples that their Ascended Lord Jesus now ruled over heaven and earth, in communion with God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus rules His church on earth by His Word and Spirit. The young church in Jerusalem grew in number so quickly that it was hard for the apostles to manage all of the pastoral care that was needed. Needy church members received assistance from the church treasury. Widows were among them. There arose a complaint from widows who were Greek speakers that they were not getting the level of assistance provided for the Hebrew speaking widows.

An internal conflict brewed in the infant church, but the Lord Jesus, who had given His Spirit to the apostles, led them to a salutary resolution. They called upon the congregation to elect seven men to oversee the church's service of mercy and caregiving. These deacons, with the help of the Lord, led the church's work in support of the poor among them with integrity and fairness. So the good word of the Lord Jesus continued to be proclaimed by the apostles and believed many of those who heard them.

One of those deacons, named Stephen, was led by the Lord also to perform miracles, and to preach the gospel, like the apostles. Stephen's preaching caught the attention of a group of Jewish leaders. They tried to discredit him in theological debates, but they were no match for the Holy Spirit spoke through the deacon. Finally, his opponents became so angry that they seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin, the same council that had condemned Jesus.

As it had against Jesus, the council leveled false accusations to try to intimidate Stephen, so that he would recant his teaching, but their strategy failed.

Standing before his accusers, Stephen's face shone with angelic light. And he spoke, not in his defence, but to give further witness to Christ.

Today's reading omits most of Stephen's beautiful sermon, including only its conclusion. He answered the charge that he spoke against the temple and the law by reviewing the long history of Israel's disobedience to its faithful God, finally accusing his accusers of following in the faithless footsteps of their fathers by rejecting Jesus as the Christ.

When Peter's Pentecost sermon exposed the complicity of his hearers in the death of Jesus, it cut them to the heart, filling them with deep desire for mercy and grace. However, those who heard Stephen call for repentance responded with violent fury. Like a fierce pack of wolves, they fell upon him. They dragged him outside the city to stone him.

Jesus was no less with Stephen than He had been with Peter at Pentecost. The Lord had taught that some of His witnesses would follow Him down the path of death for their faith in Him. Stephen was the first to do so. Jesus upheld His faithful servant, and He granted Stephen a heavenly vision. As he was pelted by rocks, Stephen caught sight of his Exalted Lord, standing at God's right hand, prepared to receive His precious lamb safely in His strong arms. Before the stones crushed the life from his body, Stephen uttered two prayers that echoed Jesus' own dying prayers: *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,"* and *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*

Stephen's vision and his prayers gave clear witness that Jesus ruled His church even as His gospel was rejected and His servants mistreated. Christ died for the sins of the whole world, and He rose from the dead to rule His church in grace. At peace through the storm of violence, Stephen closed his eyes as if to sleep, knowing that Christ His Lord would awaken him from his rest on the day of resurrection.

Nearly two thousand years have passed since Stephen was martyred, and still Jesus rules over His church. He is our Lord. There are still times when congregations like ours can be tested and riven by conflict. Conflicts tempt us to either flee in fear, to walk away in disgust, or to take a side and fight with each other. But Jesus conquered sin by His death, and He has ascended to rule over us in peace; He is our Lord. Through the conflict that arose between Greek and Hebrew speaking widows in Jerusalem, He raised up a new group of faithful servants in that church. Jesus promises to bring good out of the evil that church conflict threatens. He is our Prince of Peace, so rather than fearfully hiding from trouble or angrily making more of it, we call upon our Lord when we find ourselves in conflict. We ask Him to help us to listen to each other, to acknowledge the part we play in the conflict, to forgive each other, to understand our problems, and to work together to solve them.

Jesus rules over us here and now. When so many of our neighbours seem either indifferent or hostile to the gospel in which we trust, we can be tempted to doubt that. We can be intimidated and to keep our faith to ourselves, but Stephen's Spirit-filled witness and faithful life show us the way that we, by our

Lord's grace, should follow. We live to proclaim that Jesus rules over all by His saving grace.

God's Word has declared that we are all created by Him and for Him. Yet sin has alienated us from Him, so that we rebel against Him. But God whose love never fails has made peace for us with Him through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, His Son. With the Father and the Holy Spirit, Jesus rules all of creation with His almighty power. He rules over His Church with His grace. He forgives our sins and clothes us in His righteousness through the Spirit's cleansing work in baptism. Through His preached words of Law and Gospel, Jesus calls us to live before Him in daily repentance from sin and faith in His forgiveness. Christ's boundless mercy fills our spirits as we eat and drink the holy supper His body and blood. Jesus is our King, and we are His Redeemed.

Since we are safe in Jesus' care, we repent of our fears of persecution, and we resist the temptation to be ashamed of Him. Jesus reigns. He forgives us for our sins. By His Spirit's gift of faith, we to see Jesus standing at God's right hand, victorious over sin and death for us, watching over us as we serve Him, ready to return and reign in glory unending.

Jesus stands by us, so that we can stand with Him, serving people with His love and confessing His truth, until the day that we fall asleep in Him. Amen.