

# Spiritual Tourist, Settler, or Pilgrim?

May 17, 2026

A few years ago, a friend told me about visiting an old church building in a struggling downtown neighborhood. Once upon a time, it had been magnificent, with towering ceilings, hand-carved woodwork, and stone arches polished smooth by generations of worshippers. You could almost hear the echoes of weddings and funerals and choirs and Christmas Eve candlelight lingering in the walls.

But now the building was tired. Plaster had begun falling from the sanctuary ceiling. Entire sections of the worship space had become unsafe to use. Attendance had dwindled. And the congregation was asking the question so many churches are asking these days, “What now?”

But what caught my friend’s attention most were two Tiffany stained glass windows facing one another across the sanctuary. On one side was Jesus stepping out of the tomb at the resurrection: light breaking into darkness, the joy of Easter morning. Across from it was a window depicting the Ascension, with the disciples standing on the ground, looking upward as Jesus disappeared from their sight.

My friend said that in that crumbling church, the metaphor was so powerfully clear that the Christian life is lived somewhere between those two windows, between resurrection and ascension, between holding on and letting go.

Every Easter season we celebrate that the resurrection tells us that God will not abandon us to sin, that God will not let death have the last word.

And the Ascension?

Ascension is about learning you cannot cling forever to the way things used to be. Honestly, I think that may be one of the hardest spiritual lessons there is. The disciples certainly struggled with it. For forty days after Easter, Jesus kept appearing to them. Imagine what that must have felt like. After the trauma of crucifixion, after the despair, after believing everything had fallen apart, suddenly he was with them again, teaching again, eating with them again, bringing peace again. I imagine the disciples beginning to hope maybe things could go back to normal. Maybe they could get their old life back. Maybe Jesus would finally become the triumphant king they had always expected.

Which is why, in today’s reading from Acts, they ask him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” In other words, “Okay Jesus... now are you finally going to do things the way we expected?”

Every time I read this, I imagine Jesus doing a little internal facepalm.

Because even after resurrection, even after all the teachings and healings and table fellowship and forgiveness, the disciples are still imagining a world built on power, control, and domination. They still want certainty. Victory. Arrival.

But Jesus has been preparing them for something entirely different: not certainty, but Spirit; not domination, but community; not arrival, but journey.

And so he leaves. That's Ascension.

For three years he had been teaching them about compassion over domination, mercy over revenge, community over hierarchy, love over fear. Then he was murdered by the state and all seemed lost. They thought it was the end.

But then he rose, and for forty days he kept appearing among them bringing peace.

Peace. Not vengeance. Not conquest. Not nationalism. Not domination. Peace.

But the disciples kept asking what I call caterpillar questions. "Are we finally getting power now?" They still didn't realize that Jesus had been preparing them for something entirely different. Not a return to the old world, but a transformation into a new one.

That's what Ascension is really about. Ascension is not Jesus abandoning the world. Ascension is Jesus trusting the disciples enough to continue the work themselves. It is the moment the training wheels come off. It is the moment when the followers of Jesus must stop clinging and start becoming. And honestly, I think that is one of the hardest spiritual shifts there is, because most of us would much rather settle than journey.

My colleague, the Rev. Mike Piazza, talks about three kinds of spiritual people: tourists, settlers, and pilgrims.

Tourists want spirituality to be interesting, inspiring, and comfortable. Tourists visit faith the way people visit Door County in October—soak up the beautiful scenery, buy some cider donuts, take a few pictures, and then go back home unchanged. Tourists like churches that make them feel good for an hour. They like spirituality as long as it remains convenient and affirming and low-risk. Tourists don't expect transformation.

Then there are settlers. Settlers think they've arrived. Settlers believe they already know the answers. They already know who belongs and who doesn't. They already know how things should be done. Settlers stop expecting God to surprise them.

- "We've always done it this way."
- "This is our spot."
- "This is our identity."
- "This is our comfort zone."

But pilgrims? Pilgrims understand that faith is movement. Pilgrims know they are still becoming. Pilgrims are willing to let go of old maps in order to follow where the Spirit is leading. Pilgrims understand that discipleship is not about possessing truth once and for all. It is about continually being transformed by love.

I think that's exactly where the disciples are in the Ascension story. Jesus is trying to move them from settlers into pilgrims. Because as long as Jesus is physically standing there, they can keep depending on him. They can keep asking him to fix things. They can keep misunderstanding the whole mission.

But once he ascends? Now they have to become the Body of Christ. Now they have to embody the love he taught, because no one else is going to do it for them. Now they have to trust the Spirit.

And that's terrifying. Frankly, transformation usually is. There's a reason Scripture so often compares spiritual growth to birth, wilderness, death, resurrection, or fire. Real transformation is not tidy.

One of my favorite images for Ascension is actually the chrysalis. A caterpillar dissolves into goo before becoming a butterfly. Did you know that? Inside the chrysalis, the caterpillar literally breaks down. Everything reorganizes. It becomes something entirely new.

And honestly, I think many of us know what that feels like. Some of you have lived through divorce. Grief. Addiction. Illness. Coming out. Losing a job. Losing certainty. Losing a version of yourself you thought would last forever.

And maybe in those moments it felt like everything was turning to goo.

But sometimes the Spirit does its deepest work there, not by restoring us to who we used to be, but by transforming us into who we are becoming. Poet Krystal Cobran writes, "Choose less of who you were expected to be. Choose more of who you are."

That is exactly what Jesus was inviting the disciples into at the Ascension—to let go of who they expected the Messiah to be and, instead, lean-in to who the Spirit is calling them to become: not conquerors, but healers; not rulers, but servants; not fearful people clinging to the past, but pilgrims willing to journey toward a more loving future.

And maybe the same is true for us. Maybe faith is less about arriving at perfect answers and more about remaining open to transformation. Martin Luther wrote: "This life therefore is not righteousness but growth in righteousness; not health but healing; not being but becoming... This is not the end, but it is the road."

Not being. Becoming.

That's pilgrimage language, which feels especially meaningful today as we welcome new members into this church. In some churches, membership might be understood as settling, but not here. When you join Union, you're not saying, "I've arrived," or, "this church has all the answers," or "I expect it will perfectly match my spirituality forever."

No church can promise that, because the church at its best is not a museum for settlers. Church at its best is a community of pilgrims, people trying, imperfectly, to follow Jesus together, people learning how to love more courageously, people learning how to let go of what no longer gives life, people learning how to receive the Holy Spirit again and again.

So that means membership is not the end of the journey. It's a decision about who you want to travel with. It's saying:

- “These are the people I want beside me while I grow.”
- “These are the people I want praying for me when life falls apart.”
- “These are the people I want challenging me toward deeper compassion.”
- “These are the people with whom I want to practice resurrection.”

If you were with us in worship two weeks ago or if you've been reading the church communications this month, you've heard about our Passion Into Purpose Project, the grant process we've been selected to participate in through the UCC's Church Building and Loan Fund and a grant from the Lily Endowment. In this project, we're doing some internal assessment, the Church Building and Loan Fund is helping us to learn more about our neighbors in the broader metro area, and with that data in hand, we will be tasked with dreaming a new ministry.

As part of the internal assessment component of this project, today we're introducing a “Spiritual Gifts Inventory.” The intent is not to find more volunteers to fill slots on committees, but rather to remind us that the church is healthiest when people discover the unique ways the Spirit is alive within them.

Some of you teach. Some organize. Some create beauty. Some offer hospitality. Some advocate for justice. Some quietly care for people nobody else notices. Some repair things. Some encourage. Some listen. Some dream.

The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians that Christ gives gifts to the community so the whole body may grow in love. Not sameness, love.

In a moment, I will invite you into a little silence and prayerful reflection as you look over this inventory. Ask yourself: Where do I feel most alive? What kind of love feels natural to me? What breaks my heart open? What work leaves me feeling connected to God and other people? And maybe even, where is the Spirit inviting me to stop being a tourist or a settler and become a pilgrim again?

So, let's take a few quiet moments together now to begin looking through the inventory, reflecting, praying, wondering, and trusting that the same Spirit that met the disciples after the Ascension is still moving among us now. This inventory is not something you'll turn in. Rather, it is a tool to encourage an attitude of spiritual pilgrimage.

[silence]

Friends, the story of the Ascension ends with the disciples standing there staring into the sky. But eventually they stop looking upward and begin moving outward—toward Jerusalem, toward

Pentecost, toward community, toward healing, toward courage, toward the unknown future God still had for them, and that is our calling too. Not to stand still, not to cling to old expectations, not to settle into certainty, but to become pilgrims, people willing to be transformed by love, people willing to trust the Spirit enough to keep moving, people willing to let go of what no longer gives life so that something new can be born.

And in that, the good news is this: we do not journey alone. The Spirit goes with us, Christ goes ahead of us, and especially profoundly today as we receive new members, this community walks beside us.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia and amen.

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**Ephesians 1:13-23 and Acts 1:1-11**  
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