

May 28, 2017

Feast of the Ascension

Matthew 28:16-20

[Most Dioceses have moved the celebration of The Ascension of the Lord to the Seventh Sunday of Easter. Therefore the gospel text here is for that feast.]

16 The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted. 18 Then Jesus approached and said to them, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

Background

By separating the resurrection from the ascension, the Church gives us the opportunity to pray and reflect on two aspects of a single event, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. For several centuries, the church did not treat the ascension as a separate event that took place

40 days after Jesus' resurrection. The notion of the ascension as a historical event, where Jesus rose from the grave but waited for some time to be with the disciples and teach them a few last things before returning to the Father, is not supported by the scripture texts like the gospel for this feast. Here Jesus says, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Verse 19) This kind of proclamation would not occur if Jesus is still in some state of transition between death and full communion with the Father and Holy Spirit.

In Matthew's gospel, both Mary and Mary Magdalene come to the tomb as dawn arrives on the first day of the week. They witness an earthquake and an angel rolling back the stone of the cave. The angel instructs them to go to the disciples and tell them, "He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him." (Matthew 28:7) The two Marys leave the tomb fearful yet overjoyed, and run to the disciples. On their way they encounter Jesus, and Jesus himself tells them, "Do not be afraid, go tell my brothers to go to Galilee and there they will see me." (Matthew 28:10)

The gospel text for today demonstrates that the two Marys were faithful to what they were commissioned to do, "Go tell the disciples." Despite being caught in the two emotions of joy and fear, they acted. The first verse of the text also describes the disciples being faithful to what Jesus asked of them. They were instructed to go to Galilee to meet Jesus. On seeing Jesus, they too were caught between two emotions: doubt and worship.

They were commissioned "to make disciples of all the nations." (Matthew 28:19) Jesus' earlier instruction to the disciples, not to enter a pagan or Samaritan area, is set aside. (Matthew 10:5) With the resurrection, all cultural and ethnic distinctions and boundaries have been breached or dissolved. They are to "baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit." This is not the full expression of a developed Trinitarian theology of God, but it is the beginning. The fact that we, and people of every race, language, orientation, and way of life, are gathering to celebrate this feast is evidence that they, too, and generations after them, have been faithful to what Jesus commissioned all of us to do.



The Dome of the Ascension in Bethany, Israel was originally a small church built in 392 commemorates Christ's ascension to Heaven. It was later renovated in the 11th century by Crusaders and then captured by Saladin in the c.1198 and is now ironically a mosque (although not really because Muslims also believe in Christ's ascension). The complex is humble, unadorned, and quiet, not quite what you would expect from a site of such an event.

Reflection Questions

1. Who are some of the people you have had to say good-bye to in recent years?
2. How did you try to prepare for their departure?
3. Have you found any unexpected blessings from their leaving?
4. How do you think the disciples felt about the women telling them that they should go to Galilee? What might Galilee have symbolized for them?
5. The text says that when the disciples saw Jesus, they worshiped and doubted. How do you understand them both worshiping and doubting? What does the fact that they worshiped and doubted say about how God is present in your life?
6. Who were the significant people who taught you about your relationship with God and God's desire to be in relationship with you? What do you remember about those people? What does that suggest to you about how you are teaching others?
7. Why do you think Jesus in this text is sending the disciples out to all the nations?
8. Is there a difference between a community who feels that it is essential that they share the gospel with others and a community that does not take that responsibility seriously?
9. How do you hear Jesus' statement at the end of the text: "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age?"
10. As you hear this gospel, what in this text most strikes you? Can you take time to talk to God about whatever that is?

<http://il-ritiro.org/gospel-reflections.aspx>

The reflection and questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel.



The main octagonal aedicule surrounds the Ascension rock, said to contain the right footprint of Christ., the section bearing the left footprint having been taken to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Middle Ages.

The faithful believe that the impression was made as Jesus ascended into Heaven and is venerated as the last point on earth touched by the incarnate Christ.

