

REFLECTIONS FOR ASCENSION SUNDAY ~ 21 May 2023

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Today we celebrate Ascension Day! Some parts of our world celebrated this special moment on Thursday past. The Gospels give different times for the Ascension. In Luke 24, the Ascension occurs on Easter Sunday evening or, at the latest, the next day; in John 20, it occurs sometime between the appearance to Mary Magdalene (who is told not to touch the risen One because he has not yet ascended) and the appearance to Thomas (who is invited to touch him); and in Acts 1, the event happens after the forty days. Each Gospel has its own symbolic reason for the timing of this moment in the life of Jesus the Christ.

The Ascension has been observed liturgically as a Christian feast since at least the fifth century, but initially it was recognized either with Easter or Pentecost. In recent centuries,



Ascension, Jesus MAFA

following Acts 1, it has been celebrated “forty” days after Easter on the Thursday, ten days before Pentecost. Since the 1990s, many countries including Canada received permission from the Vatican to celebrate it on Sunday before Pentecost. Previously, the Easter candle was extinguished after the Ascension Day Mass to reflect Jesus’ return to the Father. Today, the Easter candle remains near the altar to emphasize the ongoing presence of the risen Christ in the Church.

The Ascension is marked by two key themes: (i) the absence of Jesus from this Earth yet with the promise to the disciples that Jesus will remain with us (although now in a new way) and that the Spirit will come, and (ii) the calling of the disciples to continue to spread the good news on Earth. Veronica Lawson rsm tell us, “Today’s Feast invites us to face the experience of loss in a transformative way. Over Lent and Easter, we have been re-mem-bering his death and resurrection. The Ascension

draws us into another aspect of the Mystery, that of the presence of the Risen One even in his absence.” This sense of presence even in absence is described beautifully by Ron Rolheiser omi:

What the pain of absence does is stretch our hearts so that the essence, the beauty, the love, and the gift of the one who is absent can flow to us without being colored by the tensions, disappointments, and the flaws of everyday life. As well, the other’s absence can work to stretch our hearts so that we can receive him or her in a way that more fully accepts and respects who he or she really is. The mystery of saying goodbye is really the mystery of the Ascension, the most under-understood mystery both inside and outside of religion. The Ascension is about going away so that our loved ones can fully receive our spirit. It is about the mystery of saying goodbye, when goodbye is not really goodbye at all, but only love’s way of taking on a different modality so that it can be present in a way that is deeper, purer, more permanent, less-clinging, and less-limited by the tensions, disappointments, inadequacies, wounds, and betrayals that, this side of eternity, forever make our intimacy a work in progress.

Keeping visible the Paschal candle after the Ascension is the Church’s way of communicating this sense of Jesus’ presence even in his absence. Indeed, this is a celebration of “love’s way of taking on another modality” so that it can be present in an even more intimate and permanent way. The writer of the letter to the Ephesians prays for us in a touching way that God, “may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of Jesus’ glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the

immeasurable greatness of Jesus' power for us who believe" (Eph 1:17-19). What wonder and joy come from seeing with the eyes of the heart!

At the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, with Joseph's Visitation, the angel tells him that the child to be born to Mary will be Emmanuel, God-with-us (Matt 1:23). Now Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus telling the disciples, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). Elizabeth Johnson csj deepens our understanding of "deep incarnation, the radical divine reach in Christ through human flesh all the way down into the living web of organic life." Both the cross and the resurrection can now be understood as intimately connecting God to the suffering, death and new life not only of human beings but of all creatures. There is little wonder that the Psalm invites us, "Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy" (Ps 47:1).

At the time of the Ascension, Jesus also promises that the Father will send the Spirit to be with the disciples, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). At the Last Supper in John's account, Jesus makes the same promise, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (Jn 14:25-27). Note that the coming of the Spirit will be accompanied by the peace of Jesus.

The commissioning of the disciples will be confirmed at Pentecost, but Jesus announces it before his departure. Earlier in chapter 28 in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus commissions the women disciples first, "Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me'" (Matt 28:10). In today's reading, Jesus commissions the male disciples, "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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). In Luke's Gospel, the commissioning words are spoken by him in the Upper Room after the gatherings with the disciples there and with Mary and Cleopas, "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things" (Lk 24:47-48).



Ascension, Fr George Saget
[Abbaye de Keur Moussa](#)

We see that, over and over again, we are reminded that our commission, our missioning, is to the ends of Earth. Although the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles (1:8), the Gospel of Matthew (28:20), and the Gospel of Luke (Lk 24:47) differ in many ways from each other, they all challenge us to go out beyond our own borders and boundaries (geographic and otherwise) to bring the good news. Even the psalmist says twice in six short verses, "God is king of all Earth" (Ps 47:2, 7). What new frontiers have you dared in your life in this past year? Do you hear God's call to dare these new frontiers and Jesus' promise that you will not be alone? Do you trust the Spirit's presence poured out abundantly on you?

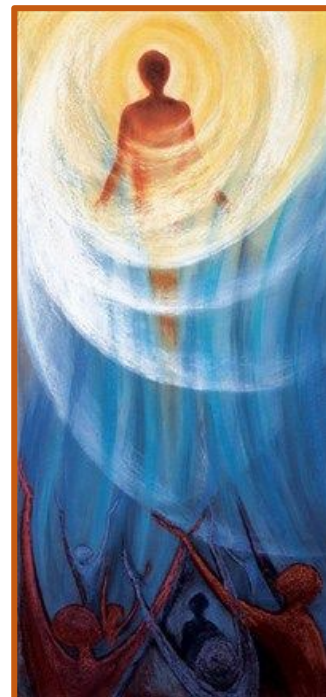
There is a delightful conclusion to the Ascension in the Acts of the Apostles account, "While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly **Ascension, John Giuliani** stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?' (Acts 1:10-11). There is a lovely prayer-poem by Rev Karla in RevGalBlogPals which hears and responds to this reproach from the two angels:

Holy One, we gaze towards misty heavens
knowing you were just with us, and now you are gone.

We watch the skies for just a glimpse of your dazzling grace,
and you send us angels, to bring our hearts and minds and soul
back into our lives, our bodies, this very present moment,
where your presence is more difficult to see in the midst of war,
of random killing sprees, bloody revolutions,
and random thoughtless cruelty.

Your angels come to us through the ordinary moments,
reminding us to pray in spite of and because of...
Your angels remind us that You indeed will empower us
to be your light and life and hope in this world,
to the ends of the earth,
wherever courage and grace is needed.

We are your people, God, and as much as we love sky-gazing,
we know that you call us to give witness
in the middle of terror, anxiety, illness, death, and apathy.
Help us to listen deeply, see far and wide, and live faithfully.
In Christ we pray, Amen



Ascension
Sr Mary Stephen CRSS
Canonesses of
the Holy Sepulchre, UK

This week we finish our journey from Easter to Ascension to Pentecost. Let us see with the eyes of our hearts, trust that the Spirit is showering wisdom on us, and know the hope to which God has called us. Find yourself in the Ascension images on these pages. Let us be both sky-gazers and earth-walkers, witnessing to the love of the God who creates, sustains, and empowers us (all of us, human and other-than-human) every single day.



Ascension of Jesus
Giotto