

“Help My Unbelief”

Ascension Day is one of the major feasts of the Church. Yet, in my experience very few parishes celebrate this feast on the appointed day or even the Sunday following as we are doing today. It is a curiosity. I wonder why we ignore this feast day unlike others in calendar. It could be that to the modern mind, the Ascension seems like something out of a fantasy movie. Somebody getting lifted up in the air and floating or zipping away to heaven seems silly. The world does not function in that way. We are left thinking that this is another one of those weird things that only happens in the Bible like seas parting, donkeys talking, flying chariots and people who live for nine hundred years. But there is so much more to the Ascension than the whisking off of Jesus into heaven.

A quick look at this passage from Luke shows that only one verse out of the ten we read has anything to do with the Ascension. The seven verses prior to that are Jesus commissioning the disciples for their upcoming undertaking. The two after his Ascension are about their response to Jesus and their return to Jerusalem.

It is what Jesus says to them in the first seven verses that is so important. Luke says that first Jesus opened their minds to what was written about him in “the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms.” Despite telling them throughout his ministry about himself and the fulfillment of prophecies, they needed to see him resurrected to finally understand. Indeed, it is only now that they understand that the kind of Messiah he was meant to be is not what they were thinking. Jesus did not come with a sword and heavenly hosts to free Israel from Roman oppression. Rather he came with love and peace to free all humanity from the yoke of evil and sin. His messiahship is one of service and care for others, most especially the poor and the outcast.

Furthermore he says, “...it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Then he commissions the disciples and turns them into apostles. No longer are they his students; they are the ones to be sent out into the world as witnesses of Jesus’ ministry, crucifixion and resurrection. They are to preach and teach about this to all people. However, there is one more thing that must happen first.

I doubt they knew what that would be because Jesus’ description is somewhat enigmatic. He says, “I am sending upon you what my Father promised; ... until you have been clothed with power from on high.” We know that power will be the Holy Spirit who comes upon them on the Day of Pentecost, next Sunday fifty days after Easter. It is then that they will finally be empowered to take on the ministry for which Jesus has commissioned them.

Not knowing what awaits them, Luke says that “they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” Unlike other gospels that show the disciples cowering in a locked room afraid of the Romans, Luke shows us a group of ecstatic disciples going each day to the Temple to praise God for Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

This is a band of happy people, men and women, who had followed Jesus, lived with him, ate with him, studied with him and trekked from Galilee to Jerusalem with him. They had been confused about some things and abandoned him in his hour of need on the cross. But when they found him resurrected, they were heartened for the mission ahead. It was a mission that for many would lead to persecution and martyrdom. It was a mission on which they did not fail. They did not abandon Jesus and his teaching when they were faced with their own terrible deaths.

The Ascension can have the same power to inspire us. We just have to set aside our Post-Enlightenment skepticism and believe that whatever the disciples saw that day, it was so potent that it steeled their hearts for the mission ahead. If that feels hard, remember the father of an afflicted son in Mark. He is frantic to have his boy healed; Jesus says to the father “All things can be done for the one who believes.” The father cries out “I believe; help my unbelief!”¹

Stand in awe with the disciples and watch as Jesus ascends like in the stained glass window of our church. Look with the eyes of love upon him who came, taught, healed, preached and was killed for the power of his words of love. Look with amazement into the empty tomb and feel the power of resurrection flood your heart. Look into his eyes of compassion as he leaves this world in order that we might preach to everyone the power of the love of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For as St. Teresa of Avila said, “Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” His commission to his disciples that day is ours as well. So go and love all in his holy name.

¹ Mark 9:23-25 NRSV