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The feast of the Ascension of the Lord is ultimately a reminder of the mission Jesus handed over to his followers, and each of the readings gives us a perspective on that reality. The opening of the Acts of the Apostles presents the scene in which Jesus told the disciples that they were to wait until they received their share of his power to evangelize. The reading from Ephesians prays for the graces needed to fulfill that vocation and know the fullness of Christ. The end of Mark's Gospel offers a recapitulation of the disciples' mission — emphasizing its amazing scope and the promise that in carrying on his work, the disciples would have the same experience and challenges as their master.

### **ACTS 1:1-11**

Luke begins the Acts of the Apostles, the second volume of his Gospel, with the confident statement: "In the first book ... I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up." That alerts us to two basic facts. First, Luke felt he had said everything essential about Jesus' life, death and resurrection in what we normally call his Gospel. Secondly, we can anticipate that this second work will tell us everything he thinks is essential to understand the beginnings and trajectory of the Christian movement after Jesus' ascension. What makes Luke's statement even more thought-provoking is the fact that he said he had dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach. This seems to indicate that, like the evangelist Mark who opened his work with the statement that it was "the beginning of the Gospel," Luke sees everything that happened through the earthly Jesus and his early followers as only the beginning of the Gospel ministry. The rest is handed over to future disciples.

This makes it even more significant that Luke portrays the disciples as still relatively clueless as they remained with the risen Christ. Although he reportedly had opened their minds to understand the Scriptures and spoken to them about the kingdom of God, their final question to him asked if they were about to see the restoration of Israel. Perhaps because he told them to remain in Jerusalem as they awaited the promise of the Father, they were still envisioning God's kingdom as a national monarchy rather than the realm of relationships that gave witness to God's will on earth. As he had explained more than once before, Jesus told them that God's future was not predictable in any way they could understand. All they needed to know was that they were to wait for God's gift of the Spirit who would teach them all they would need to know to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

That was Jesus' final message to them: Wait together for the Spirit to lead you to take the Gospel to the whole world. This

line can be considered the key to all that will follow in the work we call the Acts of the Apostles.

First, they were to wait. That meant that they had to consider the fact that even having accompanied Jesus and having witnessed his resurrection, they didn't yet know what they needed to know. They had to be patient until something more happened, something that was entirely beyond their control. Whatever they thought made them ready to be witnesses, they still lacked the power that Jesus was promising they would receive.

Secondly, they were to wait as a community. Their question about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel revealed their dream that they would replace the rulers who acted as if they were the center of the universe. Looking forward to a restored kingdom, they were individualists together, each seeking authority over others. Waiting as a community put them all on the same level, each as empty-handed (not to say empty-headed) as the other. All they had was one another. At the same time, like the party that won the election but hasn't yet been sworn in, Jesus told his disciples that they would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

At this point, the disciples must have been as confused as Jesus wanted them to be before they could receive the power to take on their vocation. Our English translation makes it easy for us to forget that in Greek the word "witness" is *martus*, from which we derive the word martyr. Now we might picture the disciples looking intently at Jesus. While they waited to hear more about what this was supposed to mean, he disappeared. As with the disciples at Emmaus, Jesus vanished at the very height of their experience of him.

The messenger angels were hardly any help. If the disciples were dumbfounded at Jesus' disappearance, the angels only announced that there was no point in just standing there. Jesus would return as mysteriously as he disappeared. They weren't going to hurry his reappearance by sky-watching. Like Mary after the Nativity, all that was left for them to do was to go where they were sent and ponder while they waited for the fulfillment of his promise.

## **PSALMS 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9**

Psalm 47 is called an "enthronement psalm." The people probably sang it at liturgies that celebrated God's kingship, using some of the symbols that accompanied enthronement rites for earthly kings. The celebrating people would have clapped their hands, blasted trumpets, and sung with cries of gladness the joyous excess that reinforces a people's identity and self-esteem.

Walter Brueggemann frequently points out that the psalms pray about and celebrate an alternate reality to that of our everyday lives. They are designed to lead us beyond the bread and circuses of our cultural experience and through joys, sorrows and pain into a deeper dimension of reality. They remind us of an alternative, the "already" embedded in the "not yet" of our Christian experience. Our faith looks to a fulfillment that has seeds and even buds in our world but which has not yet flowered into full reality.

What this psalm celebrates is God's rule over the cosmos. We recognize the "already" whenever we acknowledge God as creator and whenever we sing God's praise for the beauty of the life we have been given. We express the yearning of the "not yet" in petition, in prayers for forgiveness and in our hope that we and all of creation will be brought to share, as St. Paul says, "in the glorious freedom of the children of God."

This psalm and the feast of the Ascension challenges us to consider how we celebrate the communal dimension of our faith. We know well that we are called as a people, a body of Christ, but have we considered what we need to do to grow together in our communal celebration of hope and joy?

## **EPHESIANS 1:17-23**

This segment of the Letter to the Ephesians offers another approach to reflection on our celebration of the Ascension. The author who writes under Paul's name prays that the community may receive a full measure of the Spirit's graces. This is not to indicate that they have not already received the Spirit through baptism, rather it recognizes that grace grows in a people when they are open to it.

The prayer invites us to meditate on the surprising idea that sustaining the growth of the Christian community is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The first gifts Paul mentions are the wisdom and revelation that lead to a deeper knowledge of

God. The knowledge this refers to is not intellectual but experiential. It is a recognition of God in one's life and it flows from a wise awareness of the personal and communal effects of grace, discerned in the light of the revelation received from the word of God.

The second petition is that the community acquire a heart-felt perception of the hope implied in their vocation. That is nothing short of the hope to share in the fullness of Christ who enjoys the presence of God. In a word, this is a prayer that the community comprehend what it means to be risen with Christ.

## **MARK 16:15-20**

Virtually all Catholic Scripture scholars concur that these last verses of the Gospel of Mark do not come from the hand of Mark the Evangelist. Mark ended his Gospel with the highly unsatisfactory explanation that the women fled from the empty tomb and said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. Mark used that conclusion to goad his community to proclaim the Gospel or admit that they would cower for the rest of their lives. His editors couldn't withstand the temptation to give the Gospel a more satisfactory ending. The verses we hear today come from one of the revised endings that became a part of the final product of Mark's Gospel. This is not to say that they lack "Gospel truth," but only that they came after Mark finished his writing.

What these verses do is what a preacher or catechist does when preparing to summarize the Gospel in a way that seems adequate to their audience. The first part reflects the great commission in Matthew when Jesus sent the disciples to baptize in his name. The next verse echoes John 3, reminding us that God sent the Son into the world that the world might be saved and that those who refuse to believe in the Son are condemned.

In regard to the signs that will accompany believers, some like healing and exorcism were quite familiar to the disciples. Speaking in foreign languages reflects the Pentecost experience, but serpents are only mentioned in the Christian Scriptures in Luke 10:19 which promises the disciples sent on mission that they can tread on serpents. It also recalls the serpent tempter of Genesis, and calls to mind the image of the Virgin Mary crushing the serpent's head. The overall point is the same as found in Luke's commissioning of the disciples: Jesus promises that nothing will harm his evangelizers, a promise that must be understood in the light of his own martyrdom. The final lines respond to Mark's original ending, proclaiming that the disciples did indeed preach the Gospel to the world.

# **Prayers: Ascension**

**By: Peg Ekerdt**

## **Introduction**

On this feast of the Ascension, we remember that Christ's ascension marks the definitive entrance of Jesus' humanity into God's heavenly domain (CCC #665). This feast reminds us that like the first disciples, we are not to dally "looking up at the sky," but are to get busy proclaiming the glory of God's kingdom by the witness of our lives.

## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you took on human form and became one with us: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you conquered death and revealed to us your divine glory: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you now commission us to continue the work of your kingdom: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** My friends, let us pray for the needs of the world and the needs of all gathered here:

**Minister** For the church, for grace to open our hearts to the Spirit promised on that Ascension Day, To heed the call to

stop looking up at the sky and to create the kingdom in our midst ... we pray,

- For Pope Francis — for length of days in service to God's people as he embraces the commission to preach the kingdom ... we pray,
- For leaders and citizens of this nation, for work that protects the vulnerable in our midst: the unborn, the poor, the immigrant, the homeless, the mentally ill; for courage to promote the common good, and ever and always, to seek peace ... we pray,
- For the sick of this parish community, for those who live with depression, addiction or anxiety ... we pray,
- On this Mother's Day weekend, with gratitude for the women who have given us life and nurtured us along the way, for all whose yearning for children goes unfulfilled, for those who await the birth of a child ... we pray,
- For our mothers who have died and for all our beloved dead; with hope in the promise of eternal life, we remember ... (names) ... we pray,

**Presider** Gracious God, you sent your Son to show us the way to the kingdom. Open our hearts to your will. Lead us in your love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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