Spirituality
Scripture for Life



(Unsplash/Paul Pastourmatzis)



by Sr. Mary M. McGlone

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

May 20, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

In the opening lines of the Acts of the Apostles, the second volume of his Gospel, Luke describes the disciples' 50-day period of learning the meaning of the Resurrection. For 40 of those days, the risen Jesus made himself known to them, revealing that he had passed through death and teaching them again what he had always taught: "The reign of God is among you" (Luke 17:21).

Luke is the only evangelist to describe Jesus' ascension, and he ties the two volumes of his Gospel together by describing it at the end of the first and the beginning of the second (Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:9). In Luke's presentation, just before ascending to the Father, Jesus sent the disciples into a retreat, a 10-day time of reconstituting themselves in preparation for the experience of Pentecost (Acts 1:11-26).

Matthew, taking a very different and subtle approach to Jesus' departure, starts this story when the myrrh-bearing women met an angel who sent them to announce that Jesus was risen and would meet his disciples in Galilee. As they obeyed those instructions, the risen Lord appeared to them, and he, too, commissioned them to announce the news and send the disciples back to where they had started.

The Ascension of the Lord

May 21, 2023

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 47
Ephesians 1:17-23
Matthew 28:16-20

Matthew says nothing about what happened as the disciples retraced their steps for the 60 miles separating Jerusalem from Galilee. What did they do and say to one another along the way? What happened as they returned to where they had first fallen in love with Jesus?

What a hard homecoming it must have been! What could they say to their friends and relatives? They had journeyed so far following a master who inspired them to leave everything behind. Now, when the news of Jesus' execution had surely arrived before they got there, how did they face those back home whose words or gazes asked, "What now?"

Matthew, exquisitely in tune with the symbolism of the Hebrew Scriptures, simply tells us that they went to Galilee, going like their ancestors to a mountain of encounter with God. (Remember, among others, the mountains where Noah's ark landed, where Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac, where Moses encountered the burning bush, where God gave the 10 commandments and where Jesus sat as he spoke the Sermon on the Mount.)

There, like those who had gone before them, the disciples found themselves on that threshold of faith where amazement left them both worshiping and doubting.

Matthew tells us so little, yet enough. There on the mountain, when the disciples saw Jesus, they truly came home. In doubt and confusion, joy and wonder, they encountered the one who knew and loved them like no other. And Jesus, knowing that mission offered them the only path to comprehending his mystery, sent them to take his message to the ends of the earth.

Jesus, who had come to understand his mission by putting it into practice, knew that no theory, no law, no dogma, no commandment can elicit genuine faith. The only path to deep belief is to step out and walk on the water of faith in the one who sends you into mission.

Advertisement

Inviting them to this living faith, the risen Lord told the disciples that his message of unfailing love was the only genuine power in the world. As they practiced and preached that, bringing others into communion with God, they would recognize his presence among them until the end of ages.

The letter to the Ephesians gives us another iteration of this message. The author makes an astounding claim in these few words: "God has put all things beneath [Christ's] feet and gave him as head … to the church *which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way*" (emphasis added).

This explains what Jesus, the promised Emmanuel/God-with-us of Matthew 1:23, meant when he promised, "I am with you until the end of the age." Christ remains present in and through his disciples.

As we hear in Acts, faith is an experience of knowing the presence of God and waiting/yearning for more. The narratives of the women at the tomb, of the disciples waiting in Jerusalem, and of those who returned to Galilee, all reveal Christ present in the community that strives to grow in faith. Ephesians tells us that faith in Jesus is not a belief about him, but a belief *in and through the community* that is his body.

As we celebrate the feast of the Ascension of the Lord, the Scriptures teach us that genuine faith is a way of life in community. The feast of the Ascension reminds us that our vocation is to continue being and seeking God with us, "until the end of the age."