Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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“Why do you stand here looking up at the sky?” (Acts 1:11).

The Ascension of the Lord

Acts 1:1-11; Ps 47; Eph 1:17-23; Mt 28:16-20

It has been said that life is like a sentence; we do not know its full meaning until the last word has been said. This gives us some perspective on the central theme of today's Scripture readings. Only when Jesus has departed from history do his disciples begin to understand his mission as it is transferred to them. His Ascension begins their retreat as they await the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Jesus' physical absence from history thrusts the mystery of his continued presence through the Holy Spirit into the faith community. We are now the body of Christ, the church in the world. The Eucharist we celebrate on this Lord's Day is the memorial that "re-members" Jesus as the head of the body, united to us as incorporated into him by baptism.

The Acts of the Apostles visualizes Jesus' departure as a literal ascension like that of Elijah the Prophet, taken up into the sky in a fiery chariot. And just as Elisha, his successor, received his mantle and a double portion of his spirit, so Jesus’ disciples receive the mind of the risen Christ and the gifts of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Matthew’s Gospel ends with the disciples being sent to evangelize the world.

At a Catholic Worker retreat years ago, Franciscan Sister Jan Cebula offered this thought on the readings for the Ascension. “Most young people leave home to grow up. But in the case of the church, it is Jesus who has to leave so we will grow up.” Unless he departs, we will focus all our expectations on him.

This is what the angels warn the disciples standing there looking up at the sky when Jesus disappeared. Why do you stand here? He has gone ahead of you into the world. You will find him there, especially among the poor, the crucified of history. He is counting on you to be his hands, his face, his voice, his healing and forgiving presence to a wounded world. Be the one you are waiting for. Now is your time. Receive the Holy Spirit. Don’t be afraid. Be the church. Be Christ to the world!

If Jesus is the last word of history, we are the question that drives his message through time toward its fulfillment: What difference does it make that we are baptized in Christ and animated by his Holy Spirit? Is our mission to create shrines where we gaze upward and await his return? No. Living the question is the meaning of our discipleship and the focus of our prayers. The tension between the kingdom that is both here and not yet is the arena in which we will fulfill our mission to transform the world.

Our retreat begins today. We are invited to pray with all our being, personal and communal: "*Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth.*"