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"What really happened?"

That question rises up any time we read the varied accounts of the risen Christ's presence among his disciples. You can't just put the stories together and come up with a clear picture. We know the authors didn't intend to write history or biographies; they were evangelizing. They wanted to lead their readers to what Pope Benedict XVI in [*Deus Caritas Est*](#) called an "encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."

Mark, the first to write a "Gospel," ended his narrative with the unsatisfactory statement: "Then [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" ([Mark 16:8](#)). Mark knew that the Gospel continued, but writing at a time of persecution, he used that unsatisfactory ending. If they didn't overcome their fears and proclaim the good news, the Gospel would fall into oblivion.

The Ascension of the Lord

[May 17, 2026](#)

Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 47

Ephesians 1:17-23

Matthew 28:16-20

In the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus' final mandate to Peter and the church: "Feed my lambs" ([John 21:15-17](#)).

Luke wrote his Gospel in two volumes and included two versions of the last moments the disciples spent with the resurrected Jesus. In his first volume, he tells us that on the day of the resurrection, Jesus led the disciples to Bethany, blessed them and "parted from them and was taken into heaven" ([Luke 24](#)). Luke opened "Volume 2," the Acts of the Apostles, saying that Jesus continued to appear among them for 40 days before being taken up into heaven.

Matthew, whose account we read today, says that — following the instructions of the women — the disciples met the risen Christ in Galilee.

Today, we hear both Luke's second account and Matthew's Galilee version. In Acts, Luke gives us the Easter Season with the 40 days of Jesus' appearances and the coming of the Spirit, which we will celebrate next week.

Obviously, Luke wasn't bothered by telling the story in two distinct ways. What was his point in telling of the risen Christ's 40-day sojourn on Earth? Perhaps it's an explanation of mission — one in which Jesus gave the disciples an experience similar to his own in the desert. Before he began his public life, Jesus spent 40 days in the desert discerning about his mission and what it would cost. He had to confront doubts and the temptation to serve himself rather than God.

According to Luke's account in Acts, after the resurrection the risen Christ spent 40 days appearing to his disciples, preparing them for the mission just as his prayer in the desert had prepared him. We don't know much about the conversations they had, but we know that what happened among them kept them together as hopeful believers.

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In contrast to Luke's tendency to depict everything in the most favorable light, Matthew offers us a brutally honest account. He admits that the disciples were doubting even as they encountered the risen Christ on the mountain. Yet, Christ said nothing like, "O you of little faith." Instead of calling them to growth, he sent those waffling believers out with the mandate to continue his mission. Then he was no longer with them.

Today's feast invites us to admit our own frustrated desires for certainty and clarity in the midst of doubts or weakness of faith. Obviously, the disciples didn't have all the answers. What they did have was a mandate: "Go! Evangelize!"

We have the same mandate. Rather than wait for full clarity, we are called into mission just as we are. Doing Christ's mission made it possible for the disciples to experience his Spirit. As Paul tells us, when disciples carry the Gospel to others, their hearts will be enlightened and they will receive wisdom and revelation and, most of all, the hope that belongs to their call.

This is what gives our lives "a new horizon and a decisive direction." We will learn that our best and deepest growth in faith comes through sharing the Gospel,

through facing our doubts and those of others and digging deep enough in our souls to touch into the encounters with Christ that give our lives a horizon.

At the end of Luke's account, two angels appear on the scene with a seemingly gruff message: "Why are you just standing there looking up at the sky? He will return in as much mystery as you have known with him and seen in his departure."

We can speculate all we want. We can look for the signs of the end of the world, but mission will give us a new horizon and we will know the power of the Spirit working in us.

It will really happen.