

Today is the last Sunday of the Easter season – the Sunday after the Ascension of Jesus. The feast of the Ascension was this past Thursday. The Ascension of Jesus Christ is critical to the life -- belief -- and work of the Christian community! Without the ascension, several significant things would never occur. So I want to look at the Ascension today looking at Acts and the last few verses of Luke's Gospel, NOT today's reading but the reading for the Feast of the Ascension – Luke being the author of Acts as well as the Gospel bearing his name.

*"I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*

*Then He led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up His hands, He blessed them. While He was blessing them, He withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." Luke 24:49-53*

To better understand this Gospel, we need to first place it in context with what happened earlier in the Upper Room, thinking back to the first two Sundays after Easter. The disciples were terrified and afraid when they saw Him and He tried to calm their fears, saying: "Peace be with you." He then asked, "why are you troubled?" Jesus stressed in, this brief encounter, that He is indeed real! The Jesus who died on the earlier Friday was, in truth, the now Risen Christ. Christianity is not founded on dreams of disordered or disoriented people. It is historically grounded on the conquest of death and on a historically substantiated resurrection. Belief is essential to the Christian faith. Why, then, are we so often troubled even as we build our belief in the knowledge of Christ's resurrection and ascension?

The answer is often found in how much we allow or don't allow the Holy Spirit to guide our lives and set us free for discipleship. William Barclay, the great Scottish theologian has said many times, "there is a time to wait on God... and a time to work for God." We need to discern this time, because action without preparation most often fails. Before we act for God... we need to wait on God... in prayer...seeking wisdom ...listening... and experiencing the Holy Spirit moving within us...preparing our hearts and minds for action. It is only then that we are prepared to move forth, with the praise and joy that comes in knowing Jesus Christ as personal Savior and the ascended Lord! Otherwise, we are just acting on our own.

This is what Jesus is pointing to in anticipation of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit empowers us to be Jesus' witnesses, to share Him with others in the same love in which He has shared Himself with us. But these disciples at the Ascension were still in anticipation of this. And without the Ascension, Pentecost would not have come. Without the Ascension, the Spirit would not descend in that way until the Son was no longer here. What this means is that if Jesus never ascended, the church would have been limited without the benefit of the Holy Spirit being everywhere, in every church and every Christian. We would be doing what we do for God, just acting on our own! So, the Ascension is a very critical event. The good news is that Jesus DID ascend and the Holy Spirit did descend at Pentecost.

The disciples did not leave the scene of Jesus ascension in frustration. They left knowing full well Jesus' divine nature and His place at His Father's table. They left with great joy, which was the exact opposite of their reaction the first time He left them. And so they were to wait, as we see in the Acts reading, for the promised One who was to come. And when He came, they would be Jesus' witnesses.

There is a story in which Jesus has arrived back in heaven after His time on earth. Even going to heaven He bore the marks of the cross. As the angels talked with him, Gabriel, always inquisitive, said to Jesus: "Master, you must have suffered terribly for those people down there." "I did," Jesus said.

"And", said Gabriel, "do they all know about how you loved them and what you did for them?"

"Oh no," said Jesus, "not yet." Just a few in Palestine know."

"What have you done," said Gabriel, "to let everyone know about it?"

Jesus said, "I have asked Peter, James, and John and a few others to make it their business to tell others about me, and the others to tell others and others and others and others, until the farthest people on the widest circle know what I have done."

Gabriel was less than convinced that this would work. He said to Jesus: "What if Peter, James, and John and the others get tired and give up or forget and fail? What would happen if way down the years, say 2020, people just don't tell others about you? Is there another other plan? ...A back-up strategy?"

Jesus replied: "I haven't made other plans. I'm counting on them!"

When Jesus ascended into heaven, He went to be with his Father, so that the Holy Spirit would come and empower us for God's purposes. In a sense, Jesus left the church with us, and the world in our hands to tell what he has done. We are His body. He is counting on us! There is no alternate plan. Either as believers we share the word of the Risen and Ascended Lord, or we fail His call to be witnesses to the world. At Baptism we made a covenant with God. Today we need to ask ourselves are we still in covenant with Him. If the answer is yes - then we are His witnesses in words and in actions! If the answer is no - then we need to pray for the renewal of our faith.

Let us pray.

Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will. All that I am and all that I possess You have given me: I surrender it all to You to be disposed of according to Your will. Give me only Your love and Your grace; with these I will be rich enough and will desire nothing more. Amen.

A Prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola