



Contributed by Brother John Cline, CR

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ASCENSION OF THE LORD
May 16, 2021

GATHERING TIME *(10-15 minutes)*

Introduction to the Word:

There was a period in my life that I would never want to live again, nor wish on an enemy. It was preceded by an energizing sabbatical renewal program and experience which included new friendships, faith sharing, and education. My enthused spirit carried over into a new ministry. Gradually, with time and experience, it became obvious that I was the proverbial square peg in a round hole. With the aid of my community, I relocated and began a different ministry that better matched my gifts and talents, and became a long, productive and rewarding experience. But, the seemingly long interim between the two ministries resulted in me experiencing a very dark place. I felt alone, abandoned by God, and that the blessing of renewal was replaced by the image of being adrift on a small patch of frozen ice floating aimlessly in a dark, endless, frigid sea. Only gradually did I come to appreciate that the experience of grief, suffering, and feeling of helplessness aided me in my new ministry. Only with prayer and reflection did I sense that God was making use of that experience for me to be with the sick, suffering, dying and grieving. And I know, too, that there was an undercurrent of faith support during that despondency. Without being conscious of it at the time, the belief and faith of those who had touched and influenced my life was a life raft.

And I wonder how the apostles reacted after experiencing Jesus risen, and then watched Him leave again when He ascended from their sight. At some point we come to appreciate that the departures we experience (relationships, health, life itself) cannot harm us. The Ascension provided them, and us, with a guide post and road map.

Warm-up Activity: (about 8-10 minutes):

What changed circumstance or loss of an important person left you high and dry?

How or when did a new perspective occur to you or renew your hope?

What spirit or aspect of faith do you recognize in yourself that lives on because of another's influence?

The Table of the Word

Absent but Present

If we take seriously the words of Jesus in the Gospel—His mandate sending us forth to continue His mission—we may be filled with various emotions: excitement, doubt, joy, panic, hope, even fear. The enemy of faith is fear. I am reminded of what U.S. President F.D. Roosevelt once said, “courage is not the absence of fear, but the assessment that something else is more important than fear”. If we take FDR’s words seriously, we cannot help but realize “it’s not about me”. The Risen Lord is leaving us, but not leaving us abandoned nor idle. Just the opposite! He is entrusting us with His ministry. This is epitomized in the words of today’s Entrance Antiphon “Men of Galilee, why gaze in wonder at the heavens? This Jesus ... will return as you saw him go, alleluia” (Acts 1:11). Here the angel reminds the apostles that it is now in their hands. Get to it—the mission of Jesus Christ! This mandate is also ours, here and now.

Very often we use the words ‘disciple’ and ‘apostle’ interchangeably, without realizing the important distinction between them. A disciple is one who listens, one seated at the feet of the master and follows a certain discipline in order to be faithful to the master. However, we cannot remain as disciples sitting forever in a comfortable pew. We are called to be apostles! An apostle is one who is sent, who goes out and shares what they have heard, seen, and experienced at the feet of the master. We eventually need to take the step and, like those “Men of Galilee,” stop looking up and allow ourselves to be transformed into people of action, bearing witness to Him by what we say and do. The Ascended Jesus may be absent from our sight but remains in our midst forever, even in our weaknesses.

Leader:

My friends, today we remember the meaning and significance of the Feast of the Ascension. Jesus left His disciples on their own, but with the assurance that the Holy Spirit would be with them. Let us renew and deepen our faith in the promises of the risen Jesus, and remember that we are not left alone in the world. At the same time, we recognize that we, too, have been commissioned, and turn to the Lord for guidance and strength.

Lord Jesus, you have called us to be your disciples and to listen to your Word, **Lord have mercy.**

Christ Jesus, you send us the Holy Spirit, a source of grace and inspiration, **Christ have mercy.**

Lord Jesus, you send us out as your apostles to share your Good News, **Lord have mercy.**

Let us pray (together):
*O God, whose Son today ascended to the heavens
as the Apostles looked on,
grant, we pray, that, in accordance with His promise,
we may be worthy for Him to live with us always on earth,
and we with Him in heaven.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever.
Amen.*

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION TIME (45 minutes)

(As Christians we believe that the **WORD** of God, we hear proclaimed each Sunday is an empowering Word, and that God is present in the Word proclaimed. This is the Word that God wants us to hear today. The dynamic of the Small Christian Community, namely, reflecting on our life-story within the context of this Word, and sharing the insights of these reflections, is such that God's Spirit becomes present, and the gifts of the Spirit are experienced as empowering and life-giving.)

FIRST READING (Acts 1:1-11)

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles, who he has chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This", he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So, when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the time or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem; in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go to heaven."

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

SECOND READING (Ephesians 1:17-23)

Brothers and sisters: I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of the heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

God put this power in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.

And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.
The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL (Matthew 28:16-20)

A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Matthew. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The Gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.**

(Allow ten minutes for quiet and for a brief reflection on a meaningful word or thought.)

COMMENTARY:

The past three Sundays we have been reading from the gospel of St. John, who places much emphasis on Jesus’ divinity. Today’s gospel is from Mark whose focus is more on Jesus’ humanity. Reading and praying the scriptures, flavoured by the complementary styles of these authors, help us better appreciate our saving God’s intimate relationship with us.

The first reading from the Book of Acts was authored by Luke, a companion of Paul, who joined him in some of his travels. Luke’s gospel, his first book, describes the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and in Acts, he writes of the continuation of the Lord’s ministry post-Ascension. Luke’s recording spanned some thirty years, up to approx. AD 60. The emperor Nero began persecuting Christians in AD 64. Some scripture scholars question if Theophilus was actually a person or symbolic, as this Greek name means “God-lover”. Or the term “most excellent” could address an official in high office and Luke may be composing a defense for Paul, who was in prison awaiting trial before Nero. In any case, Luke outlined the Lord’s ongoing teaching and working beyond the ascension and the Spirit’s work in the growing early church.

The Ascension marks the Risen Jesus’ last appearance to His disciples before He was taken up in a cloud (the cloud of glory, or *Shekinah* in Hebrew) associated with God, as in the pillar of cloud in Exodus or the cloud at Jesus’ Transfiguration. The Risen Lord makes three significant statements. He instructs them to wait; promises the baptism of the Holy Spirit, (reminiscent of His baptism by the Spirit in the Jordan); and instructs them to be His witnesses. The “power when the Holy Spirit has come upon” them is not dissimilar to the Annunciation to Mary (Lk. 1). And so, God’s Spirit brings about the birth of the Messiah and the birth of the church (Acts 1). They would be witnesses strengthened to carry on His ministry in Jerusalem (where Jesus was executed by an angry crowd), in Judea (where His ministry was rejected), in Samaria (where Jews were despised), and to the ends of the earth (where Gentiles were regarded as dirt of the earth).

Luke makes it clear to Theophilus, and to Jesus’ followers, that this message is divinely inspired. Jesus not only shared the truth that the Father wanted Him to reveal during His earthly ministry, but after His resurrection He continued to teach and instruct. He promises God’s power will be

active in and through them and us. Jesus left them, and us, well prepared to carry out His mission; now we just need to trust, have confidence in Him and do it.

The Second Reading, from Paul to the Ephesians (1:17-23) follows directly from the first reading, in the sense that here St. Paul is giving the Ephesians practical ideas of what their new life in Christ should look like. God has given them “a spirit of wisdom”. This spirit will guide them. With the “eyes of your heart enlightened”, they have discovered the “hope to which He has called” us, and “the riches of His glorious inheritance among the saints”. The “immeasurable greatness of His power for us to believe” is a great gift. St. Paul is telling us that we have all the spiritual ‘tools’ that we need to ‘build’ the kingdom of God.

“The Good News of the Gospel spread throughout the world as a result of person-to-person, heart-to-heart encounter with men and women who accepted the invitation to ‘come and see,’ and were struck by...the speech and gestures of those who bore witness to Jesus Christ”.
Pope Francis, World Communications Day 2021

This Feast of the Ascension calls us to be more faithful and generous sharers in the work of God. WE are now entrusted to “*go ... and make disciples of all nations*”. We have been authorized, commissioned by Jesus to do this – to share in His life and ministry. Today’s Feast gives us an opportunity to look back, and recognize the ways that we are already sharing in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ – and give Him thanks for the love, gifts, blessings and talents He is using to build up the kingdom. And we also look forward, with hope, to new ways that we can share in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Pope Francis stated: “Don’t forget this! The Ascension of Jesus into heaven acquaints us with this deeply consoling reality on our journey: in Christ, true God and true man, our humanity was taken to God. Christ opened the path to us. He is like a roped guide climbing a mountain who, on reaching the summit, pulls us up to Him and leads us to God. If we entrust our life to Him, if we let ourselves be guided by Him, we are certain to be in safe hands, in the hands of our Saviour, of our Advocate.”

(Allow about five to ten minutes for the participants to react to the **Commentary** to identify a newly discovered insight or idea.)

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. (Acts) “*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*”

- a) Where have you experienced ‘*Judea*’, ‘*Samaria*’, *rejection*, or *ridicule* because of your faith?
- b) Do I procrastinate in doing the will of God? Why? What am I waiting for?
- c) Remembering that we are life-long learners, what have I learned from Jesus, and what is the most important thing (in my estimation) for me yet to discover?

2. (Ephesians) “*May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened.*”

Take a few moments to reflect on St. Paul’s metaphor, “*the eyes of the heart*”. What sort of experience is he trying to describe? What personal attitudes hinder experiencing with “*the eyes of the heart*” in our following and sharing the Good News? What makes it easier?

3. (Matthew) “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ...*”

- a) What are concrete examples of my sharing in the life and mission of Jesus?
- b) Which gifts and talents have I discovered, and dedicated in a special way, to this?
- c) What gifts and talents do I hope to attain, through the grace of God, which will help me to be ever more graced to “*go ... and make disciples of all nations*”?

CARING-PRAYING TIME: (10-20 minutes)

(This time is reserved for quiet prayer as well as for an action-response to the communal reflections. The intent is to 'outreach' to the larger community. The facilitator should allow for a **moderate pause** between each of the numbered suggestions for reflection and action.)

1. Word for the Week: "I am with you always, to the end of the age"

2. Suggestion for the Week: Take time each evening to review your day and discover how you have been an instrument of the life and ministry of Jesus during the day—how you have been His 'hands', His 'feet', His 'eyes', His 'voice', His 'heart'? And it might also be productive to identify moments when we were more of an *obstacle* than an *instrument*.

3. Intercessions: (Response: Lord, hear our prayer)

Leader: Jesus returns to the Father in glory so that we all might share in the glory of the world to come. We lift our prayers for the coming of that kingdom in our midst.

Lord, you promised to send your Holy Spirit to empower us; help us recognize and claim the gifts we have been given, we pray...

Christ Jesus, for wisdom to discover how You are sending us forth – to whom, when, where and how, we pray...

Lord, You have chosen us to follow your disciples; may your Spirit teach us to pray and quiet our minds and hearts, we pray...

Renew the "*eyes of our hearts*", to see ourselves and others as You see us, so that we can be better instruments of holiness in our age, we pray ...

Increase the awareness of the "*riches of his glorious inheritance*", that we may not let pass any opportunity to share Your life, and share "heart-to-heart" with others, we pray ...

For an outpouring of the "*immeasurable greatness of His power*" on each one of us, as we live our commission to "*go ... and make disciples of the nations*", we pray...

Animate our lives as You enlightened and strengthened the apostles so that our thoughts, words and actions may manifest Your presence, we pray...

For hope, the virtue most associated with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, that we will be brave in responding to God's grace, and sharing the Good News with others, we pray ...

For those burdened by the pandemic, that their physical, mental, or financial struggles may be supported by our words and actions, we pray...

And how can we help you in prayer this week?

Let us pray (together):

*May the grace we have received from you, Lord,
kindle in our hearts a longing for the heavenly homeland.
Help us live with integrity and may our faith animate all that we do.
Almighty ever-living God, grant, we pray,
that Christian hope may draw us onward
to where our nature is united with You.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

We pray that all those in our influence be moved to be open to your Word and your Spirit, **OUR FATHER ...**

Celebrating the Word, Resurrection Ministries of the Congregation of the Resurrection Ontario-Kentucky Province (including the former Resurrection Centre), 265 Westmount Road North, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G7. (*Celebrating the Word* was founded by Father Frank Ruetz, C.R., now deceased). For information: Email:provincialoffice@resurrectioncollege.ca website: www.resurrectionists.ca The Scripture version used in this commentary is the *New Revised Standard Version* (copyrighted by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA).