

## Homily for May 24, 2020 (Ascension Sunday)

The first reading came from a book within the Bible called the Acts of the Apostles and written by the same author who wrote one of the four gospels, the Gospel of Luke. The opening line in Acts, Luke writes, ***“In my first book, Theophilus.”*** The first book refers to the Gospel of Luke. Acts of the Apostles his second book. So, think of the Bible not as a book but as a collection of books or a mini library.

Who is this Theophilus? Probably a high-ranking Roman who converted to Christianity. He was high-ranking because Luke introduces him as “your Excellency” (Lk. 1:4). Theophilus is Greek name meaning “lover of God.” He is no longer a Roman pagan who loves many gods; he is a Christian convert who loves the one, true God. Since the Word of God is a living Word, and since we are hearing this living Word, here and now, we are the new lovers of God.

This reading from the Acts of the Apostles is a description of the feast we celebrate today, Ascension. While Jesus is ascending back into heaven and the disciples are gazing upward, suddenly 2 men in white robes appear, saying, ***“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”*** This is actually the third time in Luke’s Gospel that two men, seemingly from heaven, appear out of nowhere.



The first time is when Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him up Mount Tabor. There they would witness his transfiguration. There they would also witness the appearance of the two most important Old Testament

figures, Moses and Elijah, who lived 13 hundred and nine hundred years, respectively, before Jesus. They, themselves, do not say a word at the Transfiguration. But their presence was perhaps saying something like, “We speak for all the prophets who have ever come before Jesus. And we vouch that he is the long-awaited Messiah. He, not us, is the fulfilment of every human desire. We represent all those in the past who spoke for God. But this Jesus is God in the flesh.”

Now comes the second appearance in Luke's gospel of these two men appearing out of nowhere. It's Easter Sunday morning and the women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. His body was never properly anointed, because he was hastily taken down from the cross as Sabbath was quickly approaching and no work, including anointing bodies, could be done on the Sabbath. They do not find Jesus' body there, but they do find two guys in white robes, saying, ***"Why look among the dead for someone who is alive?"*** (Lk. 24:5).

And then comes the third appearance of the two men in white robes. These two men in white are watching the disciples who are watching Jesus ascend back into heaven. There is a lot of watching going on. And these two men in white say to the disciples, ***"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"*** It's almost the same words spoken to the women at the empty tomb: ***"Why look among the dead for someone who is alive?"***

In other words, these messengers from heaven, tell both the men and women, "You are making a big mistake; you are looking for Jesus in all the wrong places. He's not in the tomb, and he's not in the sky." We often do the same, do we not? We look for love, as the song says, in all the wrong places. Were these two guys in white at the tomb, and these two guys in white at the ascension the same two guys on Mount Tabor, Moses and Elijah? We will never know for certain, but my instincts tell me it was them. What does it matter, if it was them or not?



I invite you to look at it this way. When we speak about Jesus' life, we speak about ***continuity*** and ***discontinuity***. These reoccurring appearances of these men in white, probably Moses and Elijah, tell us that Jesus was the fulfilment of the desires of men and women for hundreds and thousands of years. There was continuity with what the prophets told us God was like and what Jesus told us God was like. Yet, with the birth of this Jesus, and with his preaching and healing, something absolutely new and powerful broke into the world. This was discontinuity. The message of God's love was a continuous message from the prophets clear through to Jesus. Yet when Jesus said, ***"I give you a new commandment"*** (Jn. 13:34), we

knew we were dealing with discontinuity more than continuity. Something new was afoot in the land.

Think of continuity and discontinuity in your own life. Better still, think of a loved one you have had to say good-bye to in death. These loved ones of ours are both risen like Jesus, and they are ascended like Jesus. They are ascended: they have returned to God, their origin and their destiny. They are physically no longer with us, and boy do we miss their presence. That is the world of discontinuity. I am sure the disciples of Jesus felt the pain of discontinuity as they saw him ascend into heaven and as they walked the earth without his physical presence any more.

Now think of continuity. Think of that same loved one and how you have clearly felt their presence even though they may have died years ago. You find yourself saying such stuff as, "What would Mom have said in this situation?" or "what would Dad have done in this situation?" The next thing you know, you are saying and doing what they would have said or done had they physically been here. That is the world of continuity. We believe that while the body goes into the grave, the relationship and the love we shared never dies. We believe in the world of continuity each time we say in the Apostles' Creed, "***I believe in the communion of saints.***" And at our funerals, we hear the priest pray, "***Life is changed*** (discontinuity), ***not ended*** (continuity)."

American storyteller John Shea says, "We meet the ones we can no longer touch by placing ourselves in situations where their spirits still flourish." Jesus is both resurrected (he still lives here among us, that's his promise), and ascended (sitting at the right hand of God). If that is true of him, and his life is the pattern for everyone else's life, then our loved one who have gone before us in death are also resurrected and ascended into heaven.



My mother died 18 years, and in that time I have visited her grave only a handful of times. Why? Because it's always the same story every time I stand in front of her tombstone. Two men in dazzling white clothes appear out of nowhere and say, "Why do you

stand looking up to heaven? Or, why do you look among the dead for someone who is alive?" It is then that I know my time in the cemetery is over, and it is time for me place myself in situations where her spirit still flourishes, like hanging out with my nieces and nephews. Each of them has some characteristic of their grandmother, yet many of them were not even born when she passed away. How can that be?! I don't know. What I do know is: if I look up into the sky like the men— or down into the grave like the women—I don't get it. But if I look out, and not up or down, I finally understand Ascension.

Fr. Phil