

Homily for Sunday, May 21, 2023



I've had the good fortune to make two pilgrimages to the Holy Land. My advice, first to myself and then to those traveling with me, was the same both times-- honor the event not so much the place. For example, we will never know, with absolute certainty, the exact spot where Jesus was born. That's not important. What's important is the event, the inbreaking of God into our world in human flesh. It makes no difference whether Jesus was born in Bethlehem or in

Shediac. God broke into the world in an unmistakable and undeniable way in this Jesus and has changed the world forever. This same principle of honoring the event and not so much the place applies to today's feast, the feast of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven.

Three times in the Gospel of Matthew, certain disciples were instructed to meet Jesus in Galilee after his Resurrection. At the Last Supper Jesus said, "After I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee" (Mt. 26:32). Three days later, at the Resurrection, an angel appears to the women at the empty tomb and says, "He is risen and is going ahead of you to Galilee; that's where you'll see him" (Mt. 28:7). Three lines later, as these women are going to tell the Apostles what the angel said to them, Jesus himself appears to them and says, "Rejoice. Don't be afraid. Tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; there they will see me" (Mt. 28:10).

I would have hedged my bets that the Ascension and the great missioning to "**make disciples of all nations**" would have occurred in Galilee. However, we are told in the Acts of the Apostles, today's first reading, and in other Scripture accounts, that the Ascension took place in Jerusalem. They were instructed **not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father**. It matter little where it happened; it matters much that it did happen.

What can we take from this feast, this event, even if we're not certain where it occurred? One big thing we should take is that this departure of Jesus is not a departure at all but the way to a greater intimacy between him and us. It's the necessary going away that paves the way for Christ's great return in Spirit. He has already hinted at his on-going presence among us when he said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be in your midst." That's Ascension talk long before the Ascension occurred. Jesus also said, "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sister, you do to me." That again is

Ascension talk long before Ascension took place. He seems to be saying, “Look into the face of your brothers and sisters and you will realize I never left you.”

In the Gospel of Luke, two men in dazzling clothes appear at the empty tomb on that first Easter morning, seemingly out of nowhere. They say to the grieving women, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” They are looking *down*, into a tomb, for someone who has already told us that he is the Resurrection and the Life. That same author, Luke, writes the Acts of the Apostles. At the Ascension, the disciples are looking *up* into the sky. Guess what? Suddenly, two men in white robes appear to them and say, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

The women make the mistake of looking down, and the men make the mistake of looking up in the hopes of seeing Jesus. The two men at the empty tomb are likely the same two men at the Ascension. Their message is the same: “You’re looking in the wrong place. Don’t look down. Don’t look up. Look out.”

Can we believe that while Jesus is ascended (he’s in heaven with God the Father), he is also resurrected (he’s on earth among us in Spirit)? He is both resurrected and ascended. If it’s true of Jesus, it’s also true of every loved one of yours who has gone before you in death. They are both ascended (with God) and resurrected (still present to you). Although I believe my mother, who died almost 21 years ago is with God in heaven, I also believe in her on-going presence in my life, her resurrection.

Another thing I take away from this event of the Ascension is a simple sentence that was deliberately placed in the gospel. It says, ***“When they saw him (Jesus), they worshipped him: but some doubted.”*** You would think, in their attempt to promote faith in Jesus, they wouldn’t even mention that there were doubters. Yet, they are mentioned. Even though I have the benefit of being 2, 000 years downstream from this event, I still have moments of doubt. The fact that they had doubts and that I have doubts tells me that faith is a journey and not an accomplishment. The fact that some doubted tells me that Jesus calls even doubting disciples to make disciples of all the nations. There are no such things as professional disciples. There are ordinary people and broken people bearing witness to what Christ has done in their lives to other ordinary and broken people. That’s the Church. We are able to do that for each other because of one reason only—because of the presence of the Spirit of the Risen Lord. ***“Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”***

Fr. Phil