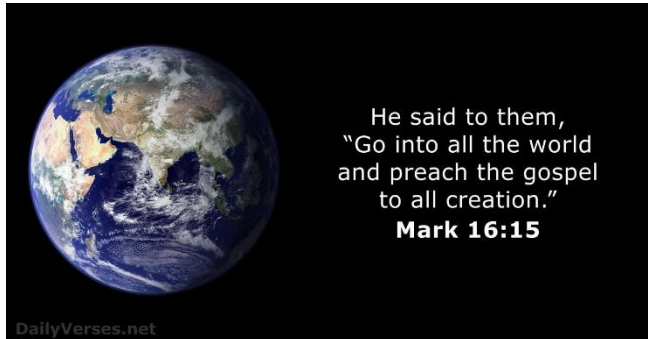


Homily – May 12th, 2024 – The Ascension of the Lord



Twenty-one years ago, when I was young and foolish, I hopped in the car and drove 3,600 km to go to a retreat center in Tucson, Arizona. It was in the middle of the Sonoran Desert, surrounded by giant cactus plants, some with arms stretching 25 feet into the air. In each of the retreatants' rooms was the standard bed, desk, chair and a lamp. I had been on retreats before. So, I knew there would be a piece of paper on the desk outlining meal times, where the washrooms could be found, as well as the times and places of the talks. However, what was written in bold, red print on the welcome letter on my desk went something like this: "Welcome to the Redemptorist Renewal Center. In the morning, before you put on your shoes, shake them out. Snakes and scorpions like to crawl in them at night for warmth and shelter." My zodiac sign is Scorpio, but I have no time for scorpions or snakes. I slept the whole first night with one eye open.

In today's gospel account of the Ascension, Jesus says that one of the signs, of anyone who believes in him, is the ability to pick up snakes in your hands and you will not be harmed. I don't pick up snakes. I avoid them or throw rocks at them. I always knew my belief in Jesus was a little shaky; this just proved it.

Ascension is kind of a strange, low-keyed feast in the Church, although seeing Jesus ascend into heaven must have been absolutely remarkable for the 11

apostles who witnessed it. Ascension is a little bit difficult to get our heads around. While Jesus is returning to the Father, he is simultaneously promising to come to his followers--a kind of bilocation that's not easily understood. How can he be in two locations at once? How can he be with the Father in heaven yet, at the same time, be an ongoing presence to us here on earth?

I have to believe that he is not some exception to the rule, but that he is the pattern of all life, including yours and mine. Perhaps we have the ability, as Jesus did, to inhabit two worlds simultaneously. After all, he did say, "You are in the world, but you are not of the world."

Once again, I find Fr. Richard Rohr says it better than I can, when he writes, ***"Remember this: There are always two worlds. The world as it operates is power; the world as it should be is love. The secret of Kingdom life is how to live in both—simultaneously. The world as it is will always be built on power, ego, and success. Yet, we must always keep our eyes intently on the world as it should be—what Jesus calls the reign of God. Power apart from love leads to brutality; but love that does not engage with power is mere sentimentality. A lot of Christians today are still trapped in one or the other"*** (Jesus' Plan For A New World, p. 41).

I think he's right. Neither power alone nor love alone can transform the world. You have to put them together. In that first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, the Apostles asked him, ***"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"*** Simply by the way they asked the question, Jesus knows that the Apostles

have grasped very little about why he came in the first place. They are still looking for a warrior Messiah who will overthrow the Romans and restore Israel to the good old days when King Solomon ruled. This is power without love; this is brutality. This will get them, and us, nowhere.

Jesus will give them power alright, but it will emanate from his own love for the world. It will not be sentimentality, nor will it be brutality. He tells them, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. So, wait in Jerusalem for it. Why wait? Because you need time to undo and redo. You need time to open your hands in order to let go of what you thought my mission in the world was about. Without that "letting go," you will not have hands open enough to receive my Spirit. You cannot receive me into your hands if your hands are already clenched around your own agenda. My Kingdom cannot come until your little kingdoms go. And that takes time. That's why you must wait.

Is it so different in our own lives when we have to say good-bye to someone in death? Grieving takes time and patience. Perhaps the death of a loved one is the best opportunity for us to understand Ascension. We believe that those who have died have ascended to God. Yet, it's not, "farewell and have a good trip." Each person's death is the invitation for us to open our hands and let them go, even though it's the last thing we want to do or feel capable of doing. Clinging comes much more natural to us. However, if we do not let go, we will not be able to receive their spirit into our lives. "Unless I go (physically)," says Jesus, "I cannot send you my Spirit." In the Ascension, Jesus is not so much leaving as he is preparing us to receive him in his new presence.

The Incarnation, the coming of Jesus into our midst in human flesh, was not an experiment, a pilot project, that ended after his 33 years on earth. He didn't ascend with the words, "Well, I guess that's over with." Jesus' presence is never given just to be taken back again. Jesus came in the flesh just like our loved ones. He died just like our loved ones. He returns to us in his Spirit just like our loved ones. And just like our loved ones who have gone before us, Jesus asks us to be open to his new presence.

So, what do we do with the snakes and scorpions? This power to deal with snakes and scorpions, if we believe in Jesus, is said a little differently in John's gospel. After the meal and after Jesus washes his disciples feet at the Last Supper, he says, perhaps the most comforting words in all of Scripture, ***"I told you all this so that you will be able to find peace in me. In the world you will have hardship...snakes, scorpions, demons, poverty, sickness, war, famine, abuse, addictions, depression, anger, violence...but take heart, for I have conquered the world."***

Nothing we will face, will we face alone. And everything we face has already been overcome by the Risen Jesus. When you put power and love together, everyone will know that you are my witnesses to the ends of the earth.

~ Fr. Phil

