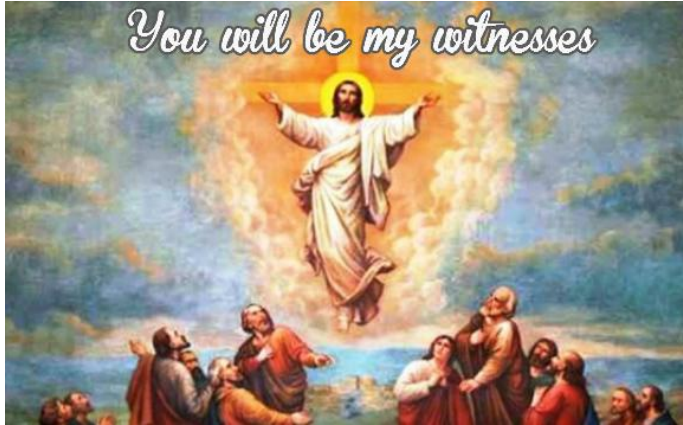


## Homily – June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025 – The Ascension

I've always felt that today's feast, the Ascension, only makes sense in the light of next Sunday's feast, Pentecost. If Ascension is about the great leaving of Jesus, then Pentecost is about the great return of Jesus. Or, as Jesus said in



last Sunday's gospel passage, ***"I am going away, and I am coming to you"*** (Jn. 14:28). To which I always want to ask, "Jesus, are you coming or are you going? Because this kind of talk is very confusing." The truth is, that

unless he leaves (in his physical presence), he really can't come to us in his spirit, which is a much more intimate presence. That's not just true of Jesus; it's also true of anyone we have had to say good-bye to in death. If you have ever had to bury a loved one, you have already lived the dynamic of Ascension and Pentecost, the great letting go and the great return. I always pray that a grieving person, who struggles so much to let go of a loved one who has died, will eventually open to the great return of that loved one in spirit. Clutching hands eventually have to become open hands if we are to heal and receive the spirit of others who have passed on. Easier said than done, I realize.

The Ascension of Jesus is portrayed differently in the four gospels. For instance, Ascension in John's gospel seems to happen at the crucifixion itself when Jesus bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Then, in that same gospel,

on Easter evening itself, Jesus appears to his disciples, huddled in the Upper Room in fear, and breathes his Spirit on them. So much for Ascension being 40 days after Easter and Pentecost being 50 days after Easter. In Luke, we just heard that Jesus ascended back to heaven from Bethany, just next to Jerusalem. However, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus' ascension takes place on a mountain in Galilee, far from Jerusalem.

Regardless of the seemingly contradictory accounts, I think when we get down to the brass tacks, Ascension is really about two things: Jesus is preparing those disciples then and us now for his ongoing presence among us and, secondly, he's sending us on a mission to continue his work in the world. Jesus could have been born in Sackville and ascended from Shediach, and it would have made no difference. The goal still would have been to receive his Spirit and pass it on to others. If that's the case then what does the Ascension mean to us? And what is it asking of us?

Our gospel writer, Luke, is also the one who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, the two best accounts of the Ascension. In the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples are stressed at the prospect of being left alone once Jesus physically leaves them, so they ask, ***"When will you restore the Kingdom?"*** Fear of abandonment is the most primal fear in us from the moment we are born, and I don't think it completely leaves us. Jesus tells them not to fear his absence but to open to his presence. His leaving is not absence but a means to a greater presence. With his new presence in their lives, they are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Notice the circle is

widening. Start with Jerusalem. Jerusalem is full of Jews. Start with telling your fellow Jews about God's kingdom. And if you have any time left, go to Samaria, which is a mixture of Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). Tell that mixture of people about God's love and mercy. Lastly, go the ends of the earth. Tell people who are not Jews nor a mixture of Jews and Gentile—those who have never even heard of God, the ones at the fringes of the earth—about how they, too, are sons and daughters of God.

That's supposed to be the pattern in our lives too. You don't have to be the savior of the world. You just have to start with witnessing to God's love to the people closest to you, the people in your own Jerusalem, the people you live with, work with, and hang out with. Look out at the world around you and see those, close at hand, who are hungering for peace, love, attention, affection, and just to be included. Be Christ to them.

Our first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, has Jesus lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. As they were gazing toward heaven, two men in white robes suddenly appear and say, ***“Men of Galilee, why do you look up toward heaven?”*** I know they want to hold onto this last glimpse of Jesus, like we want to be present to our loved ones who are leaving us. However, the message from these two strange men is that if you're looking up, you're looking in the wrong place. He's not to be found up there.”

Similarly, on Easter Sunday morning, we are told that some women arrive at the tomb of Jesus with their heads bowed down. They are looking down into a

grave for the remains of Jesus. Two men, in brilliant clothes said to them, “Why are you looking among the dead for someone who is alive?” (Lk. 24:5). If you’re looking down, you’re looking in the wrong place. He’s not to be found down there.

The chronic mistake of the men is that they look up to find Jesus and can’t find him. The enduring mistake of the women is that they look down to find Jesus and can’t find him. We are not to look up or to look down. If you want to find Jesus, look *out*. Start by seeking out Jesus in the faces of those nearby, right here in our own Jerusalem. If we can find and love Jesus here, then we can spread the compliment to those in Samaria, and finally to the end of the earth.

As you probably know, Paul, before his conversion, was known as Saul. And Saul, the Pharisee of all Pharisees, had no problem persecuting followers of Jesus, even to the point of stoning them to death. Until one day, he was knocked to the ground by a flashing light. Out of the blinding light came a voice saying, **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? I am Jesus whom you are persecuting”** It was the voice of Jesus, the ascended one, whom Saul had never met. Upon hearing the voice, Saul now realized that if he persecuted others, he was really persecuting Jesus. It took Saul, after three days of blindness, to realize that this ascended one, Jesus, was present in people. With the realization--that whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sister, you do to me—Saul regained his sight. His name changed from Saul to Paul. He no longer looked up to heaven to find God, nor did he look down on those people, whom he was convinced could not possibly have God

in their lives. Instead, he looked out and saw the face of Christ in everyone. Saul was now dead; Paul was now alive.

The issue is not for us to prove that Jesus is alive, but for him to prove that we are not dead. If we're not dead, we are on a mission. The mission is to live as Jesus lived. And to make known his mission of bringing God's forgiveness, mercy, and love to the ends of the earth. But, it always begins in Jerusalem, that is, with the people closest to you.

~Fr. Phil