

Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord

May 24, 2020 St. Augustine Cathedral 10:00 a.m. Livestreamed

Our celebration as God's holy People on this beautiful Spring morning in May is a Joyful one for several reasons: first and foremost because we are celebrating this glorious Feast of the Ascension of our Lord into Heaven; secondly because we get to celebrate this Feast in the midst of one of our most revered and important national holidays---Memorial Day---the unofficial beginning of Summer-time. Even though we won't be able to celebrate the holiday this year the way we would normally do because of the restrictions we're all still observing, in a way that very fact might make us all focus a bit more on the true meaning of this holiday, as we give thanks for and remember all those who gave their lives in the cause of freedom for our country.

But today is also a joyful day because, I pray, this will be the last Sunday that our churches will be empty as we all look forward with great joy to our diocese's return to Level 1 public celebration of Masses on Wednesday of this week, just in time for next Sunday's celebration of the great Feast of Pentecost with a modified and limited attendance.

As we focus on today's very special Feast, I think it's safe to say that the Ascension of Jesus is one of our very favorite Feasts of the entire Year.

St. Luke's Gospel tells us this major moment in Jesus' life and ministry took place 40 days after Easter, and it marks the completion of Jesus' Bodily Presence in this world. The Ascension is one of the major articles of our Faith in which we profess our belief every week in the Nicene Creed, and every time we pray the Apostles Creed. We reflect on the Ascension as the 2nd Glorious Mystery of the Rosary. In all the Gospel Accounts, the Ascension marks the end of one chapter, and the beginning of the final chapter of Salvation History---the chapter the Church has been living for 2,000 years, and the chapter---the "final age"--- that all of us are living right now as we continue on our journey of Faith in this world. The Feast of the Ascension

is a dividing line between Jesus' bodily Presence in this world which was limited to the time and place when Jesus walked the earth in the Holy Land 2,000 years ago; and Jesus' abiding Presence with us thru His Church, in His Word and in the Sacraments, and by the Grace and power of the Holy Spirit---a Presence that is unlimited, universal and everlasting.

So there are lots of reasons why this Feast is so special. But perhaps the main reason why it appeals to us is because it evokes so many different images. And given the detailed descriptions that we heard in both the First Reading and the Gospel, we can almost picture that incredibly, extraordinarily amazing Moment!

Jesus loved His Apostles/Disciples and wanted to remain with them; but, as we heard Jesus say so many times in His Farewell Discourse in St. John's Gospel, He knew that it would be far better for them, and for all of us, if He left, not to abandon us---not to leave us orphans---but so that the Holy Spirit could come, and so that His Presence could be with us forever. Jesus also knew that the Apostles weren't perfect. In fact, we heard one of them ask Him just before He ascended: "*Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*" We also heard St. Matthew tell us that when the Apostles gathered with Jesus on the mountain, "*they worshipped, but they doubted.*" In some ways, Jesus was probably a bit distressed that they weren't further along in their understanding; He knew they still had so much more to learn. I'm sure that's why Jesus kept urging them to "remain" in Him; He trusted that they would be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit when He would come in just a very few days.

And so, we take very seriously Jesus' final words according to St. Luke: "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" And St. Matthew tells us that Jesus said: "*All power in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the*

Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Those two final instructions make up what we have come to know as the “Great Commission” that Jesus has given to the Church. And after charging them with that great mission, that’s when that glorious moment came when, as St. Luke tells us: *“He was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight”*. They were left standing there looking up in the sky; they didn’t know what else to do. St. Luke somewhat humorously tells us that two Angels tapped them on the shoulders and said: *“Men of Galilee: why are you standing there looking up in the sky?”* Since they had no good answer, they went back to the upper Room, and prayed, and waited. They may not have known for certain exactly what, or for Whom, they were waiting. But thankfully, that’s what they did--- for the next week.

That’s where we will find them when we return next week to celebrate the great and solemn Feast of Pentecost, and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon those Apostles who would be transformed into zealous, courageous, fearless witnesses and proclaimers of the Gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth. But not yet---for now, they waited... and prayed. And they also remembered the promise that Jesus made to the Apostles: *“Behold, I will be with you always, until the end of the age.”* That was probably hard for the Apostles to understand at the very moment when He was leaving them. But the Holy Spirit would make all that clear; they came to realize that He would remain with them thru the Holy Spirit in ways He could never have done before.

And I hope and pray that’s clear to all of us too. There’s nothing more beautiful, reassuring, and empowering than someone whom we love and respect encouraging us, and assuring us that we are not alone---promising that they will be right there with us. **Together**, any challenge can be met and overcome.

These are challenging days. It dawned on me just the other day that we have spent the last half of Lent and the entire 50-day Liturgical Season of Easter in this state of “lockdown” and quarantine. Even after living through it, it’s still hard to comprehend what repercussions this worldwide pandemic has had on our world and all of us, first and most important of all in terms of the deaths of nearly 350,000 people around the world, and almost 100,000 in our own country. Even though we’re beginning to see the loosening of some of those restrictions, these 3 months have been very stressful and upsetting for all involved; and as we’re all well aware, we are far from saying that this pandemic is over---we remain in its grip and dealing with the ongoing repercussions.

But even beyond the pandemic, it seems clear that we have great cause to be concerned about the state of the world in general which, as we all know, has moved very far away from God and God’s ways over these 50 years or so. Anyone who is committed to following the ways of God knows what that means first hand. To live a life of faith and to live according to moral principles can result in being made fun of at least, or even criticized or persecuted by a society that has no moral principles, and a culture whose values are as far from the values of the Gospel as they can be. But we need to take courage, which is another important reason why we should truly celebrate this great Feast of the Ascension, because we come to realize that Jesus loves so much that He entrusts His Mission into our hands to safeguard, to build on and to continue. All of us who are baptized into Christ share in Jesus’ mission, the mission He entrusted to His Church.

The first way that we do that is by committing ourselves to live holy lives---to live our lives in ways that follow Jesus’ commandments of Love, the Beatitudes, the Gospel values of mercy, justice, love and forgiveness. And when we live our lives as followers of Christ, that’s how we are “witnesses”----just by giving good example---in our daily actions, in our words, in our temperaments, in the ways we work for peace and harmony in our relationships, and in the

ways we do whatever it takes to seek reconciliation when there are divisions and differences. What Jesus said to the Apostles on the Mountaintop 2,000 years ago just before He ascended, He also meant for us as well. Our Baptism means that our whole life is a “mission”, and we are “sent” to “go”, and live with a purpose. Jesus also tells us to “make disciples”, “to baptize” and “to teach”.

Pope Francis talked about this beautiful Feast of the Ascension earlier today in Rome, and commenting on this very challenge, he said: “We may surely feel inadequate when faced with such a daunting task, as the Apostles undoubtedly felt. But we must not be discouraged, remembering the words Jesus addressed to them before ascending to Heaven: ‘I am with you always, to the very end of the age’.” As Pope Francis concluded: “Jesus remains among us, and that is the source of our strength, our perseverance, and our joy.”

Part of being faithful to our mission to “give witness”, to “proclaim” and to “make disciples” is the responsibility that we all have to stand up for what is right and just according to Jesus’ teachings in the midst of a world that doesn’t agree; to not allow political opinions to distort or distract us from adhering to Gospel values, and to know that choosing to follow Jesus and to live according to God’s ways is the most important goal of our lives.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, this Feast is so very important for these, and so many more reasons. The Ascension celebrates the fact that Jesus has come among us and has won for us the Gift of Salvation, and He remains with us now through the Sacraments and the actions of His Church. We need to follow the Apostles’ lead at the end of today’s Gospel. They didn’t know exactly what to do, so they returned to the Upper Room----they stayed together----they remained united to Christ----they waited....and they prayed. We may not have it all figured out in our own lives. We may not feel like we have the strength to be faithful to Christ in the midst of so much pressure against us. But, we’re not alone. Jesus remains with us always.

And the power of the Holy Spirit, Whose indwelling with us and the Church we look forward to celebrating next week on Pentecost, can transform us and make us fearless, courageous, convicted and joyful witnesses of Jesus in all that we say and do---if we open ourselves to allow the Spirit to *set our hearts on fire with Love* for Jesus.

And so, I urge you to do what the Apostles did: remain united in the love of Jesus----stay together---keep strong, fervent and committed in the practice of your Faith----and most importantly of all---wait.....pray....and invite the Holy Spirit to dwell in your hearts and to guide your lives.

May the beautiful words of St. Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians which we heard in today's Second Reading be our prayer: *"May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of Him. May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope that belongs to His call."* As He stays close to us, may we stay close to Him, now and forever.