

Homily for the Ascension of Jesus Christ

Endings and Beginnings, Power and Presence Now

May 24, 2020

Offered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM

Texts: Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Mt 28:16-20

This morning, our texts present us with endings and beginnings; facts and faith; and power and presence. They are full of allusions and so revelatory in their use of different literary styles. The Acts text is a prologue to the whole of what is to follow; in fact, what we have been hearing nearly every day since Easter. Ephesians exhorts exquisitely in poetic rhythm and proclaims a *very* radical message; and Matthew instructs definitively and directly as he ends his Gospel.

We have just heard two accounts of Jesus ascending. The Matthean author sets it forth short and sweet. Jesus does not engage the lingering doubts of the gathered Eleven, but instead says: *“That’s it! Go! It is your turn now! Go and do what I have done. Go and make disciples everywhere and baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”*

By contrast, Acts describes the scene far more dramatically. Jesus continues to dialogue with his apostles, still trying to teach them the meaning of his preaching, teaching, and healing and his death and resurrection. They are still looking for *facts*, but he invites them instead into *faith* as trust and surrender. “There are some things that you will never know,” he says, “for they are of God.” And then he is “lifted up” – an allusion to the final fulfillment of his death on the cross where he was also “lifted up” on the wood of the cross. Clouds appear and two men in white show up, and it is they who have the final words, saying in effect: *No more appearances to strengthen you as you still struggle with doubt, looking for more proofs. He is gone now and yet, not gone from you because you will receive the Holy Spirit to empower you to do what he has done.*

These dramatic biblical texts have captivated painters and musicians in both the Eastern and Western traditions of Christianity from very early times. (Check it out on Wikipedia!) My favorite is the Rublev icon from 1406 with Mary standing up front in full light, no longer looking up at her Son but facing out to us serenely and with her arms up in prayer as if to say to us: *Be in peace and go out now together on the way he has shown you.*

So, heaven is not so above and beyond us and we are not left on our own to carry on! The Letter to the Ephesians states this so clearly – that the *power* of Christ as King is transformed into the *presence* of Christ as kin who is still with us now. Just before our text begins, the author writes so tenderly to the Ephesian church: “... from the time I first heard of your *faith in Jesus* and your *love for all the members of the church* I have never stopped thanking God for you ...” How beautiful! How affirming! How loving to *recognize their faith and their love* for one another!

And then those wondrous *Mays!* May God grant you wisdom and insight and clear knowledge of Him! May God grant that “*the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know the hope that belongs to God’s call*”. May you have a sense of God’s immeasurable power as strength for you! Christ is the head of the Church and you are in him and he in you, “*the fulness of him who fills the universe in all its parts.*”

As we well know our universe is struggling today in all its parts. A powerful virus that we cannot even see with our naked eye is controlling the whole human race and there is a war going on between science and excessively consumerist economics. But we are also celebrating now, the fifth anniversary of *Laudato Si*, the Encyclical that proclaims the prophetic vision of Pope Francis that all is connected, that we cannot separate social justice from ecological consciousness, that we need to commit to an “integral ecology,” and *that* from the deepest grounding of our ever-creating Trinitarian God. God is in us giving us knowledge, understanding, wisdom and *hope*, as Ephesians proclaims. We know that in so many ways, rectifying the balance of life and loving care for each other and our common home depends on us with our evolutionary advanced consciousness.

But will we do it? Do we have such hope and creativity or do we need to pray still for the “eyes of our hearts to be opened”? Can we encourage from our faith in Jesus Christ and our love for all the members of our Church in communion with all in our human family? What can we give to our Earth and our sisters and brothers in pain? To those who attend to us? To those who ask us to pray for them? And what needs do we have in order to live deeply from the loving Presence of God, already in us and in our common home, to restore balance? “There lives the dearest freshness deep down in things,” Gerard Manley Hopkins proclaimed in his well-known poem, “God’s Grandeur.” It’s in our Scriptures, too, that there is “the dearest freshness deep down” in *us*, for we live in and from our ever-creating, loving God.

Today, we celebrate the Assumption of Jesus the Christ and also the beginning of a year to be dedicated to *grasping* and *acting* from the inspired message of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*. So, I conclude with a few words from the *Common Prayer for the Fifth Anniversary of Laudato Si* that we are asked to recite today at 1 p.m. in our Eastern Daylight Time in communion with people all over the world.

*Help us to show creative solidarity in addressing this global pandemic.
Give us courage to embrace what we need to do for the common good.*

*Now more than ever may we feel that we are all connected,
in our efforts to lift up the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*

We pray this prayer through Christ our Lord,

Amen

<https://laudatosiweek.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/LSW-Common-Prayer.pdf>