

FEAST OF THE ASCENSION OF JESUS CHRIST

May 16, 2021

Texts: Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Mk: 16:15-20

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In some ways it is difficult to take hold of this Feast of the Ascent of Jesus into Heaven. After all, wasn't everything already fully given in the Resurrection? Well, indeed it was for Jesus. But his followers? Well, they still needed help in grasping to *whom* and to *what* Jesus was calling them. And so, Jesus continued to help them through his regular post-Resurrection appearances, and this one, no doubt, was a huge transition for them in their apostolic internship.

Many of us can recall viewing paintings of this scene and especially ones from the Renaissance period where they replicated the ancient cosmology shared by Greeks and Romans and Jews – with the Earth solidly here, heaven above and hell below. In so many of these paintings, Jesus is floating up into the clouds and the followers are on Earth looking up at him, astonished and most likely also grieving the loss of his physical presence.

I think we can all identify with those early followers of Jesus. Most of us IHMs can remember our *practice teaching* days where we were supervised and if needed given such encouraging extra help. (God knows I remember that I sure needed it!) I think we can identify, too, with the grief that the followers felt when Jesus left them. Have we not all had some dark days when treasured family and friends have died and we wanted their continuing presence to be able to talk things over with them? Have we not had times when clarity left us, when we were overcome with helplessness and anguish – and perhaps even felt that God had left us?

In some of those Renaissance paintings, Jesus is looking up into the heavens; in others, he is looking downward, still in eye contact with his followers. I prefer the latter ones where the eye contact is kept. In connection with that, Pope Francis spoke powerfully in his recent Wednesday Conference on the life-giving gaze of Jesus. Let me share some of his words with you this morning.

Everything comes from this: from a heart that feels that it is looked on with love. Then reality is contemplated with different eyes. 'I look at Him and He looks at me!' ... Loving contemplation ... does not need many words. A gaze is enough. ... enough to be convinced that our life is surrounded by an immense and faithful love that nothing can ever separate us from. ... Jesus was a master of this gaze. His life never lacked the time, space, silence, the loving communion that allowed (Him) ... not to be devastated by the inevitable trials, but instead to maintain beauty intact. ... (As well) ... there is no opposition between contemplation and action. ... in Jesus (and in his Gospel) there is no

contradiction. ... There is only one great call and it is that of following Jesus on the way of love.

And this is the path of contemplative prayer: "I look at Him and He looks at me". It is that act of love in silent dialogue with Jesus that does so much good for the Church.

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The early followers of Jesus were transformed fully by the energizing gaze of God and then they *got to it: preaching, teaching and healing* in Jerusalem and all over the Roman Empire by living *in God through Jesus and by the Holy Spirit*.

That's our invitation today, too – to open up again to the gaze of our loving God and then *go to it again: preaching, teaching and healing* among our Church members seeking deeper inclusion and belonging; among many other people who are seeking life-giving meaning; and among those in our civic world, so stressed with division – to show the power of love, to find the common good together, to create an integral ecology. Yes, I like the Renaissance paintings where Jesus continues to gaze at us with that tender and energizing love. And yes! Let's *get to it* again!