

Solemnity of the Ascension Year “C”    *Opening the Closed Door*  
May 12, 2013/ Mother’s Day  
Readings: Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Luke 24:46-53

Today we observe a most venerable feast in the Church, and yet one that brings with it some very mixed feelings. No, we are not upset that the Lord Jesus was taken up to heaven, but we certainly feel a tinge of sadness that he is not here in the same way as before. How much more did the apostles feel on that amazing day on the Mount of Olives, the most likely site for the Ascension?

Saint Helena built the first memorial, which was destroyed by the Persians in 614. It was rebuilt in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, only to be destroyed once again. Since the Crusades, the traditional site of the Ascension has been the property of the Muslim religious authority. All that remains is the octagonal structure that is now used as an oratory. According to tradition, on the night between Wednesday and Ascension Thursday Catholics are allowed to celebrate the Eucharist in this chapel that is closed to worship the rest of the year. The Franciscans obtained this right from the Ottomans.<sup>1</sup> This year Masses took place every half hour, all night long.

But the precise location is not nearly as important as the meaning of this magnificent event. A 4<sup>th</sup> century homily by St. Gregory of Nyssa provides the earliest evidence of a distinct feast of the Ascension. There, he describes the solemn procession of Christ into heaven, seeing the whole feast as a day of salvation. As the glorious company reached the celestial portals, the gates were securely fastened, for the Cherubim guard the throne of God. The angels

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<sup>1</sup> “Peregrinazione al Monte degli Ulivi,” Homily by Fr. Artemio Vitores, Franciscan Custodial Vicar, *Solemnità dell’Ascensione del Signore* 09 Maggio 2013

cried out: “Lift up your heads O Ye Gates, open high and wide, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.”<sup>2</sup>

But then Gregory makes the most amazing point of all— Christ was **not** attired in festive mantle for a coronation, but in the simple garb of His glorified humanity. He describes the garment of Christ bespattered with blood from the winepress of human suffering, his hands and feet covered with the marks of his passion, so that the watchmen would not open the door— they did not recognize Him.

“Who is this King of Glory?” And the angels responded, “The Lord of Hosts, he is the King of Glory.” Finally, amidst trumpet blast, the Cherubim and Seraphim opened the portals, and placed the crown of the kingdom on His brow. But notice that in the Scriptural accounts, there are no elaborate farewells; Jesus was simply taken up into heaven. As I reflect upon this, perhaps this is most fitting.

Even after all my years of ministry, it is never easy to visit someone in a hospital who is likely to die. There is no easy way to say “Goodbye,” and even as our faith teaches us of the fullness of life to come, we cling to life on earth. It is part of human nature to do so. Try as we might, we cannot palliate death—we are still confronted with a closed door. Jesus Christ overcame human death by allowing its brutal reality to penetrate his innermost being. He descended to the depths of death because only He was strong enough to overpower death, securing the ultimate victory. He did not conquer this wicked enemy by fleeing from it; nor should we.

Even in overcoming death, he remained at his core our servant. Jesus experienced death in its entirety, in its forsakenness, the ultimate surrender of himself to the will of the Father. The Feast of the Ascension reminds us not only that our true home is in heaven, but that we ought approach the gates in simplicity and humility, an

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<sup>2</sup> Homily of St. Gregory of Nyssa, 18 May 388 A.D., *On the Ascension of Christ.*”

not with an air of arrogance that announces- “I have a right to enter...what are you waiting for, let me in.”

Our ascension to the Father will not take place before we experience life’s disappointments, and bearing them in faith, we shall ultimately learn how to let go once and for all. The door, closed for so long, will be opened for us and we too will be ushered in by love. And it will be pure gift, pure grace that opens the door. As a prominent theologian said a number of years ago, “Then, stripped of all security of our own, we shall learn how to fly in the realm of love...death is love’s ‘yes’ to God.”<sup>3</sup>

Today, we celebrate the Lord’s own triumph into heaven, and yet still a kingship received in utter humility. More than anything, this must not remain merely a feast about Jesus, as much as an invitation for us. He is just far enough away that the longing of our hearts is kept alive, and just so near that our longing for heaven spurs us on to even greater works of charity. As we carry a glimpse of heaven in our hearts, let us bring heaven to the hearts of our fellow pilgrims on earth. Love will open the door, love will penetrate and destroy our fear of the unknown and bring us to our true and lasting home.

[Now, we are privileged to bless a magnificent new mosaic of our Blessed Mother and Jesus, known under the title of Our Lady, Health of the Roman People.” Much more information about this image is contained in this morning’s bulletin. You are all invited to take a holy card, located on several tables or here by the Communion Rail]

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Twofold Farewell,” *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness: Sermons Throughout the Liturgical Year*, Ignatius Press, 1989 p. 120.