



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

Father Alan's Blog

For the Sunday After Ascension Day - May 16, 2021

"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."

1 St. Peter 4:8 (NIV)

A father was at the beach with his children, when his four-year-old son ran up to him, grabbed his hand, and led him to the shore, where a seagull lay dead in the sand.

"Daddy, what happened to him?"

The son asked.

"He died and went to Heaven."

The dad replied.

The boy thought for a moment and then asked:

"Did God throw him back down?"



Even though it is one of the four "high holy days" in the Church calendar (along with Easter Day, Pentecost, and All Saints Day), Ascension Day, perhaps because it always occurs on a Thursday (just

this past Thursday, to be exact), does not get the attention that it richly deserves. This is really a shame because the Ascension holds great significance in the historical life of Jesus when on Earth and in His continuing ministry for us in heaven. Why I am particularly drawn to the annual celebration of the Ascension is that, as a weekday event, the Ascension reminds us that **Christianity is not just something that is confined to Sundays; rather, it is to be experienced and lived every day.** Tragically, though, the Ascension is far from being prominent in Christian thought, and, unfortunately, this means that many Christians miss out on the remarkable truths that the Ascension of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ holds to teach us.

To begin, then, let us look at the Ascension's "historical significance." St. Luke is renowned as a careful historian, in addition to being a caring doctor and a great storyteller. For example, when St. Luke recorded the birth of Jesus (in 2:1-4 of his Gospel), he rooted the event in its historical setting within the Roman Empire:

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David."

Later (24:50), St. Luke continued that same precision at the end of our Lord's earthly ministry by recalling the place of the Ascension at the village of Bethany about two miles outside of Jerusalem. St. Luke even dated the event - it took place 40 days after our Lord's resurrection on the first Easter Day. Also, St. Luke emphasized the presence of eyewitnesses, writing (in Acts 1:9b) that the Ascension took place:

"...before their very eyes..."

To be sure, therefore, the Ascension was a real historical event.

As St. Luke attests (in Acts 1:12), Jesus and His followers were gathered outside Jerusalem on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Upon delivering His farewell message to the disciples, Jesus lifted His nail-scarred hands in blessing and then His body commenced **to rise supernaturally** until a cloud hid Him from their sight.

Now, it is not all that surprising that the supernatural should be evident at Jesus' departure, for it was equally present at His virgin Birth and His physical Resurrection. [Neither is it shocking that – as with the birth of Christ and the Resurrection – skeptics deny the literal Ascension because they consider it to be “unscientific.” Likewise, many people (**some even inside the Church!**) doubt or outright deny the literal Ascension, choosing to argue instead that it is the “spiritual significance” that matters. Yet, there would be no assurance of the “spiritual significance” of the Ascension (or of the Virgin Birth, or of the Resurrection, for that matter) if these miraculous events did not have a firm **historical basis**. But thanks to Dr. Luke (in 24:51b of his Gospel), we can affirm without hesitation that, indeed, Jesus:

“...was taken up into heaven.”]

And just as the birth of Jesus Christ heralded the beginning of the first chapter in His earthly life, His Resurrection foreshadowed the ending of the last one; furthermore, it was essential that there should be a clear-cut event to bring that final chapter to a close. In short, there had to be a day dividing when “The Jesus of Earth” would become “The Christ of Heaven.” Thus, the Ascension was the only fitting conclusion to Jesus' earthly life. To be sure, the disciples who witnessed the Ascension saw it as an ending, as it came on a day when their faith in a flesh-and-blood person (that is, a faith dependent upon a physical presence) was ended and they now became linked to Someone Who was independent of space and time. And given that, as St. Luke indicates in Acts 1:5b, they had Jesus' definite promise of the soon-to-be-given Holy Spirit, the disciples realized that the Ascension

was the completion of the earthly cycle of Christ's life that began with His incarnation. For Jesus Himself had told them (St. John 16:28):

"I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world; again, I leave the world and go to the Father."

This served to give the disciples great assurance following the Ascension because they knew that their dearest friend was in heaven. So, make no mistake about it: Jesus' virgin Birth, His Resurrection, and His Ascension cannot be separated, as they form three parts of the one continuous movement resulting in the "Glorification of Christ." Hence, it makes sense that when Jesus met Mary Magdalene in the garden (in St. John 20:17), He said to her:

"Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'"

As if the process of Christ's Glorification, which began with His Virgin birth, and continued unabated with His Resurrection, would only be completed once Jesus was received into His Heavenly Father's presence. Thus, the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, and the Ascension are milestones in the process whereby the incarnated, crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus finally entered into the Glory of God.

Now that we have considered the Ascension from its "historical significance," let us examine its "spiritual significance." St. Luke's two separate accounts of the Ascension (the first in 24:50-52 of his Gospel and the second in Acts 1:1-12) put us, so to speak, directly in the sandals of the disciples; thus, we can visualize them with eyes uplifted as St. Luke vividly records the scene for us (Acts 1:9-10a):

"Jesus was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going..."

All too soon, the ascending Saviour disappeared from the disciples' sight. Interestingly, though, St. Mark then takes up the story (in 16:19 of his Gospel), writing from the perspective of our Lord Jesus' "ultimate destination:"

"After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God."

In summary, the incarnate Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Godhead, had indeed triumphed over not only "the world, the flesh, and the devil," but over "sin, and death, and eternal hell" as well, by His "precious death, mighty Resurrection, and glorious Ascension," proving that He was, undeniably, the Anointed Victor Who rightly assumed His eternal and heavenly throne. Moreover, St. Peter (who, by the way, **personally witnessed** the entire event) confirms this very fact, writing in 3:22 of his First General Epistle:

"Jesus Christ has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand - with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him."

Truly, Jesus had finished all the work of redemption that God the Father had given Him to do. Accordingly, in a sense, the Ascension was "Christ's Official Coronation Day" - a Divine Homecoming where His crown of thorns was eternally transformed into a diadem of glory. We might even say that the Ascension also stands for the final liberation of Jesus from all limitations of space and time, so that He is freed to be lovingly and powerfully present with every believer, in every place, in every age. For this reason (to reiterate what I said two weeks ago), it is a VERY good thing that Jesus is NOT with us now in His pre-resurrection human body, and, thereby, physically constrained to be in only one place and one time. If Jesus were, we would probably have about as much chance of being in His presence in our lifetime as we would with Queen Elizabeth II. What's more, if we were REALLY lucky, we might get a five-minute timeslot in His divine daytimer sometime in the year 2030. But, as it is, Christ the

King can be with us and in us through the agency of His Holy Spirit every minute of every day wherever we go. Hence, Jesus' Ascension makes it possible for Him to be close to each and every one of us; we need only to ask Him and to allow Him into every facet of our lives.

Thus far, we have examined the Ascension from both its historical and spiritual significances. Nonetheless, before ending today's message, I believe that it is essential to probe its "practical significance." As a doctor, St. Luke was trained to be a practical person. As I mentioned earlier, He tells his readers (Acts 1:9-10) of the disciples straining with their eyes to catch the last glimpse of their Lord, but then the disciples were quickly brought back to reality. Apparently, with their eyes gazing heavenward, the disciples failed to notice the two heavenly beings (in the form of two men dressed in white) who had slipped quietly alongside them – that is, until they spoke (in verse 11):

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking unto heaven? This Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Now, it would be an over-simplification to say that the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will be like a video of the Ascension **played backwards**, with Jesus returning to the same spot and wearing the same clothes. Although Jesus' Second Coming **will be in person**, it most certainly **will not be in private**, as St. John reassures us in Revelation 1:7b, proclaiming that:

*"Look, he is coming with the clouds,
AND 'EVERY EYE WILL SEE HIM,
EVEN THOSE WHO PIERCED HIM';
and all peoples on earth 'will mourn because of him.'
So shall it be! Amen."*

Moreover, Jesus Himself (St. Matthew 16:27) warns us that:

"For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his

angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done."

And again in St. Matthew 24:30-31:

"Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other."

Moreover, there are more than 100 references in Holy Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments, concerning Jesus' Second Coming. In short, then, the Ascension testifies to the fact of our Lord Jesus Christ's glorious return: He WILL come. (It is important to note that the disciples were not told by the two men dressed in white that they themselves would see the Second Coming of Christ. Rather, the time is **left open**. Thus, it is futile and unprofitable for anyone to speculate as to precisely when it will happen. In fact, in St. Mark 13:32 Jesus informed his disciples that not even He knew the day or the hour when the Son of Man would come; however, **the CERTAINTY is there**. And it serves to give us assurance that God is working His purposes out for His whole creation, and that when He is sent by His Father, our Lord Jesus will return just as surely as He ascended.

Therefore, the all-important practical call of the Ascension is that we are to be ready for Christ's inevitable return. To this end, a wise, but anonymous, person once said:

"If I am always ready, I shall be ready when Jesus comes."

Echoing what our Lord Jesus counselled in St. Luke 12:40:

"You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."

The true secret of preparedness is to keep “short accounts” with God and with others. In other words, if something breaks our fellowship, then we are immediately to put it right – or as St. Peter exhorts us in today’s Epistle Lesson (1 St. Peter 4:8):

“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”

For our time spent on our earthly journeys is all too short – especially when one considers the normal human lifespan in comparison to eternity. Hence, as Christians we should spend our limited and invaluable (that is, precious) time in this life seeking to do God’s work, what He would have us do. Thus, we need constantly to ask ourselves two questions:

☞ **“Are we redeeming the time until Jesus returns?”**

☞ **“Are we fulfilling the ministries He gave to His church?”**

Because we have all been placed exactly where **and when** we are for a specific divine purpose. Remember, the two angelic beings dressed in white asked the disciples:

“Why do you stand here looking into the sky?”

For it was the Earth and not the sky with which they should be occupied – to be witnesses not stargazers! Likewise, our God-given calling is not to look upwards in nostalgia, but outwards in compassion, in service to a lost world that desperately needs Jesus.

Three reasons for Jesus’ Ascension have been anonymously and astutely stated as follows:

“At the Ascension, Jesus left the Here for the Everywhere; He left the Time for the Eternal; He left the First Century to fill All the Centuries.”

Therefore, this day, this “Sunday After Ascension Day,” let us rejoice in the witness of the Ascension:

- ☩ ***Historically*** - as it assures us of the completed work of Jesus Christ’s earthly ministry;
- ☩ ***Spiritually*** - as it teaches us of Christ the King’s triumphant entry into heaven and of Jesus’ continuing ministry through His Holy Spirit on our behalf; and
- ☩ ***Practically*** - as it reminds us of the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ to judge the world, and of the need for each of us to be always ready to give a full account of our “stewardship” (or, more to the point, what each of us humbly achieved for God in this life with the gifts that each of us were graciously given by Him),

Confident that on that glorious day when we - like our Lord Jesus before us - “thither ascend,” our Heavenly Father will not even remotely consider “throwing us back down.”



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