

Seventh Sunday of Easter – The Ascension of the Lord
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Holy Family Catholic Church
Kirkland, Washington
02 June 2019

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 47
Ephesians 1:17-23 or Hebrews 9:24-28, 10:19-23
(Matthew 28:19a, 20b) Luke 24:46-53

The Ascension Is Our Exaltation

We human beings like rankings, don't we? There's the Top 25 for college football; the Top 40 for songs; Top 10 cities to live in; etc. Well, we have something kind of like rankings in our liturgical calendar, as well. There's a ranking system—Table of Liturgical Days—that tells us the significance of the holy days that we celebrate each year.¹ The highest feast—the number one ranking—goes to the Easter Triduum, the three days in which we celebrate the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of our Lord. Just below Easter in significance—the rest of the top five—includes four important solemnities that are also central to our faith: Christmas, Epiphany, today's celebration of Ascension, and next Sunday's celebration of Pentecost.

Of these four, perhaps it might seem that Ascension doesn't quite rank as highly or fit in as well with the other three. At Christmas and Epiphany, with the Birth of our Savior and His revelation to the world, we celebrate Jesus coming *into* our world. At Pentecost, we celebrate the Holy Spirit coming *into* our world. But, at the Ascension, it's the opposite. With Jesus being taken into Heaven, we celebrate Jesus *leaving* our world.

Whereas, with the other major solemnities, we celebrate and are grateful for the things that God the Father has done for *us*—sending His Son into our world to redeem us from our sins and conquer death; sending the Holy Spirit into our world—with our celebration today of the Ascension, it might seem like we are celebrating something that God the Father did only for Jesus. It might not be as apparent that we are, once again, celebrating and grateful for something that God has done for *us*.

So, the Ascension brings us kind of a mixture of feelings. It's kind of like when someone we love gets a new job or moves on to a new exciting opportunity. We're happy for them. They deserve it. But we're also sad to see them go. Perhaps the Apostles felt a similar way about Jesus' "promotion" to Heaven: "Congrats, Jesus! Happy for you! Sad for us. We'll miss you. Things aren't going to be the same without you around."

Maybe at this "farewell" the Apostles were happy for Jesus, but unsure what they were going to do without Him. And so, it's understandable that we, too, might have mixed feelings on the Ascension. We might recognize the importance of the Ascension in the life of Jesus, but maybe not recognize that it is also a joyful celebration for *us*—as joyful a celebration in our lives as the other top five solemnities.

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But, if we look back at the Opening Prayer for today's Mass we see that—just like the other major celebrations of our faith—today's celebration of our Lord's Ascension is, once again, a gift for *us*. How so? Let's pray it again:

Gladden us with holy **joys**, almighty God,
and make us **rejoice** with devout thanksgiving,
for the Ascension of Christ your Son
is **our exaltation**,
and, where the Head has gone before in glory,
the Body is called to follow in hope.²

My friends, the Ascension of Jesus is *our* exaltation. Because, where Christ has gone in glory, we are called to follow in hope.

What we celebrate today is not just that Jesus is glorified in Heaven. God is always, has always been, and will always be glorified in Heaven. Nothing we do adds to His glory. What's changed now—what we celebrate on the Ascension—is that *we* humans are now welcome into the glory of Heaven. And then we realize that the Ascension is not so much about Jesus leaving

our world—as it is about Jesus making a way for *us* into Heaven. Just like the other principal celebrations of our faith, the Ascension is a gift for *us*.

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Furthermore, today's Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord is the completion of what we first celebrated on Easter Sunday six weeks ago—way back in April. Doesn't that seem like a long time ago? With all the excitement that comes in spring—beautiful weather, planning for vacations, graduations—Easter Sunday seems like a long time ago and it can be easy to forget that we are still celebrating Easter. That we are celebrating Easter for one more week, until Pentecost next Sunday.

As a result, the significance of the Ascension can kind of get lost in the long Easter Season. But it's significant that today we celebrate the completion of what we first celebrated during the three days of the Easter Triduum. By His sacrifice on the Cross, Jesus set us all free and redeemed us from our sins. By His rising from the dead, Jesus destroyed death for us all.

And, today, the ultimate purpose of Jesus' Passion, Death, and Resurrection that we began celebrating six weeks ago is revealed. Today we celebrate why He set us free and redeemed us from sin; why He destroyed death for us. He did this so that we could enjoy freedom and eternal life with Him in Heaven. Today we celebrate His entrance into Heaven, because it means that we, too, are headed for Heaven.³

The Ascension brings the central mystery of our faith to completion. God came down from Heaven—born as a human being—so that He could bring all human beings back with Him into Heaven. Saint Athanasius sums it up this way: "...the Son of God became man so that we might become God."⁴

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Finally, the Ascension of our Lord is a celebration, not only for us, but also for all our beloved family and friends who have gone before us. Those whom we've had to say farewell to for a time. I say this because the Apostles must have felt the pain and grief of their farewell to Jesus. As He was lifted up and taken from their sight, they were left looking at the sky.⁵ Stunned. Sad. Uncertain. What were they thinking? What were they feeling? Probably something like what each of us has felt when we've said farewell to a loved one.

But what the Apostles came to learn was that the Ascension was not Jesus' *departure* from them. Rather, the Ascension was what made Jesus eternally *present* to them. By departing the limited time and space of earth, and entering the eternal boundlessness of Heaven, Jesus became eternally present to all people everywhere and in every time. I don't think it took away the sorrow they felt from His departure. But it must have strengthened the faith, hope, and joy they had about what they knew was waiting for them in Heaven.

Every day I think about people whom I've said farewell to—as I'm sure all of you do, too. My grandparents, one of my best friends from college, people's funerals I've been honored to celebrate as a priest. And because we still think of them; because we still pray for them; because we still hold them in our hearts—they are not gone. They are still present to us, but in a different way. In an eternal way.

Because of the Ascension, we have faith and hope and joy about where our loved ones have gone. Because of the Ascension, we have faith and hope and joy about being with Jesus and with our loved ones again one day in Heaven.⁶ Until that day, we rejoice, we celebrate, and we pray:

Gladden us with holy joys, almighty God,
and make us rejoice with devout thanksgiving,
for the Ascension of Christ your Son
is our exaltation,

and, where the Head has gone before in glory,
the Body is called to follow in hope.⁷

¹ Congregation of Divine Worship, *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar*, 14 Feb 1969

² *Roman Missal*, The Ascension of the Lord, Solemnity, At the Mass during the Day, Collect

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 661:

“Left to its own natural powers humanity does not have access to the ‘Father’s house,’ to God’s life and happiness. Only Christ can open to man such access that we, his members, might have confidence that we too shall go where he, our Head and our Source, has preceded us.”

⁴ CCC 460:

“The Word became flesh to make us ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4): ‘For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God’ (St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 3, 19, 1). ‘For the Son of God became man so that we might become God’ (St. Athanasius, *De inc.* 54, 3). ‘The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods’ (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opusc.* 57, 1-4).”

⁵ Acts 1:9-11

⁶ CCC 666: “Jesus Christ, the head of the Church, precedes us into the Father’s glorious kingdom so that we, the members of his Body, may live in the hope of one day being with him for ever.”

⁷ *Collect* at the Mass during the Day