

The Ascension of the Lord (B)

Christ Our Hope Parish Feast Day

May 20, 2012

Graduation is in the air. It seems more like an ending than a beginning. Commencement too seems something of a misnomer for those who are finishing up their time in school. At the very least, there is something very ambivalent about an experience that is both a closure and a rite of passage.

The Ascension scene depicted in the first reading functions as a kind of pivot or turnstile in the New Testament. Jesus' ascension into heaven is really the ending of Luke's Gospel, while at the same time it is the beginning of the same author's account of the Acts of the Apostles. In Mark's Gospel today we face much the same tension. Jesus tells the disciples to proclaim the Gospel, and then he vanishes from their midst. Ultimately, our readings focus our attention on a mixture of emotions: grief at the Lord's departure becomes entwined with hope for a graced future.

The reality of Christian discipleship is that we are almost always caught between two worlds. The history of Christian spirituality is filled with accounts of those who are torn between mission and longing to be in the presence of the Lord. Paul himself said that he longed to be with Christ, but he also recognized his vocation to preach and to teach the Gospel. In his *Rule* for monasteries, Saint Benedict clearly roots his teaching in a reality of the present, finding God in the virtue of humility, stability in the monastery, and the concrete "tools of good works." At the same time, Benedict tells his monks to seek what is above. They are "to prefer nothing whatsoever to the love of Christ." Ignatius Loyola echoed the Lord when he said that the companions of Jesus were to be "in the world and not of it." One foot in heaven and one on earth. Christians have always known that we have not here a lasting city. Abiding in this tension, or preaching the Gospel while keeping one eye toward heaven, is the consequence of Christ's ascension.

And so, after the ascension the angel tells the people of Galilee not to dwell on the present, but to look to the future: “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.” The ascension is a rite of passage for the Christian community, a time of dealing with the reality of the absence of the Lord Jesus in the flesh, but awareness that the future promise of the Spirit awaits us. It would take Pentecost to teach the newly born church that it is in his final ascension that we burst into our beginning, our commencement.

Living in the world with a sense of hope that the Lord is near must become habitual for us. To be joyful in the midst of a lot of ecclesial scandal and worldly sin is not easy. But Jesus suggests that the power to heal and to preach will overcome both demons and all deadly things that we’re dealing with right now. “The Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.” How? Jesus’ presence got the disciples through it. Jesus’ presence made them sure in their faith. Jesus’ presence transformed their fear and despair into joy for the future. And our very gathering here is testimony to his presence. He is with us still.

The belief that Jesus both ascended to heaven and yet dwells here in his body, the church, is not only a doctrine of our faith, but should drive us prayerfully through the course of our day. Christ is alive and living among us and will come again. Until then, the church, the Pilgrim People of God, is a living sign and witness to the joy and the hope of the resurrection. As we heard in the old Preface for the Ascension, “Christ, the mediator between God and people, judge of the world and Lord of all, has passed beyond our sight, not to abandon us but to be our hope.”

Therefore, we can say at this Eucharist, looking up to heaven: “We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again.” Like the resurrection, the ascension of Jesus recognizes the power of God to triumph over what defeats us – despair, hopelessness, even death. The ascension of the Lord once again lays claim to Jesus’ triumph over sin and the forces of evil that tried to crush God’s righteousness.

That is why the whole church cries out this day in an unfailing promise of the future, waiting for his coming. That is why Christ Our Hope Church on our Feast Day can stand and proclaim our Mission now and into the future (please stand and recite with me):

Christ Our Hope Catholic Church *in downtown Seattle is a beacon of light where all are welcome to grow in Faith, Hope and Love through*

- **Vibrant celebrations of liturgy**
- **Programs of faith formation, evangelization & compassionate outreach**
- **Responsible stewardship**

We are a diverse people of God whose faith inspires hope that shows itself in love.

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Our Goals:

1. Full, Active, and Conscious Public Worship & Personal Faith Development
2. A Diverse and Inclusive Community formed in Faith and Justice
3. Outreach through Compassionate Service & the New Evangelization
4. Responsible Stewardship

Amen? Amen!

Paul A. Magnano

Pastor