

## The Ascension of the Lord

June 5, 2011

In April 2008, Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States, including a visit to Dunwoodie Seminary in New York. I was there with Seattle seminarians (front row bleachers) and 27,000 young people. “Christ Our Hope” was the theme of his pastoral visit. *Saved in Hope* was the title of his November 2007 encyclical, *Spe Salvi*. “In hope we are saved,” Pope Benedict begins his encyclical, quoting Romans 8:24.

At the outset of *Saved in Hope*, Benedict sets the stage for a long and rich reflection on the nature of hope for Christians. As he says in his opening paragraph, “The present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey” (#1). In short, our hope, given to us by God, is key to our Christianity.

In the Preface of Ascension for today’s Mass, we will proclaim that Christ “has passed beyond our sight, not to abandon us but to be our hope.” Christ Our Hope. Saved In Hope. Spe Salvi. The prayer raises three important questions for pastor and parishioners on this, our parish feast day. A question too vast to answer fully: How extensive are the hopeless? How describe Easter hope? How effective might Christian hope be on the hopeless?

Hopeless are uncounted numbers. Those who have given up all expectation for a better tomorrow and those who have never had such expectation. I am thinking of the more than nine million men, women and children who perish from hunger each year. I am mourning the fifteen million children around the globe orphaned to AIDS. I am remembering the reality of nearly four hundred thousand homeless veterans living on the streets during any given year. I am agonizing over the far too many who lost their homes – and some their entire family – in the unrelenting earthquakes or tsunami or hurricanes and tornados. I am empathizing with the elderly who do not live in community and those of all ages who are uninsured with little access to medical services and overpriced medications. I am coming to know people on Seattle’s downtown streets where the dignity that comes from supporting oneself and one’s family has too often been replaced by a numbing sense of hopelessness.

Against this backdrop of contemporary hopelessness, what is Easter hope? Of highest importance is the promise of eternal life – intimate life with God now and forever. As Jesus phrased it, “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” As the Preface for Ascension concludes, “where Christ has gone, we hope to follow.” In Christian living, however, hope includes what we request in the Lord’s Prayer – “our daily bread,” God’s will in our day-to-day activity, forgiven and forgiving, graced to avoid evil. It also encompasses our duties to one another and to the earth.

But Christian hope is impossible to sustain when God is no longer part of the equation. A natural hope is not to be despised. Unnumbered humans live their lives on it. Even Christians day after day live on natural hopes of good things to come: sunny weather, satisfying work, a happy marriage, a graceful aging. Indeed, we need such hope. That is why the disciples are told not to stay standing there gawking up at the sky. That is not where the Risen and Ascended Jesus is to be found. And still the hope surpassing all others must be the Easter expectation: life lived in endless love with our God whose very name is Love.

An inspiration, I should hope (yes, hope), is to strain together to gift or restore natural hope to the homeless and the hungry, the fearful and the forgotten, the lonely and the unloved – any and all who see no reason for awakening to a tomorrow. Once enlivened in flesh and spirit by believers such as us, then they will be ready to receive Easter joy: the grace to know and love God each hour here below and the promise of life with God for all eternity.

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