

Feast of the Ascension of the Lord - 2019

The two men dressed in white, that we hear about in today's first reading, have made their appearance before. At Jesus' tomb the women who had come with him from Galilee encounter the two men who ask them, "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here, he has been raised up."

Now, the disciples are confronted by the two men again, with the question, "Why are you Galileans standing here looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way as you saw him go up into heaven."

In both scenes I have the impression that the women from Galilee and then the disciples are being admonished a bit. And I want to run to their defense.

After all, both occasions are so out of the ordinary, so unprecedented, that, to me, it seems like too much to ask that the people who are experiencing them would know exactly how to respond. Even if it is true that Jesus told them ahead of time how things were going to play out, hearing about it and experiencing it are two different things.

In my defense of the women and the disciples I want to say something like, "Why wouldn't we be standing here looking? It's a wonder! We've never seen anything like it before! We don't know what's going to happen next, so why wouldn't our eyes be glued to the spot where we last saw him?"

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The two men in dazzling white should cut them a little slack, especially if they are messengers of God, which I think they are.

The only answer that I can come up with is that there must be some danger lurking in the scene that the two men have to warn the disciples against—something that, if it's not corrected immediately, could have severe repercussions on down the road.

If I'm right, then go ahead, correct away! Make sure we get started down the right path right at the beginning.

I think the issue that needed to be corrected has to do with looking to the heavens for the return of the Lord. We can firmly believe that Jesus will come again, but it's also clear that he has no intention for us to stand there waiting for it to happen.

Before he leaves, Jesus tells the disciples that they are to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit which will come upon them, and then they are to give witness to the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. In this same power the followers of Jesus will know when the Lord returns.

There won't be any need for looking into the heavens.

How easy it is for us to forget that part—that the kingdom of heaven is being brought to earth. It's here where the whole drama is playing out. We are the main event.

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I think the main temptation that leads us into forgetting that is the fact that, when we pass over from this life into the life of the world to come, it's forever. We want to be sure and get that right.

So, we make it our goal to get to heaven by doing those things which we think will improve our chances. I know a person who is so intent on getting to heaven, with the least amount of time in purgatory as possible, that he is all about indulgences. He picks his religious practices on the basis of how large the indulgence is that he will receive.

He does good things, but maybe for the wrong reason. That could be true for many of us. And the problem with that approach is that, fundamentally, it is a house built on worry.

But there is another, tried and true method of "getting it right" and assuring ourselves a place in the kingdom of God for all eternity. It has to do with receiving the Holy Spirit wholeheartedly into our lives; to count on His presence and help and to make it our primary preoccupation to follow His promptings.

That really ought to be the thing that makes our lives go. If it is, there's no way we'll end up anywhere but in heaven. The power of the Holy Spirit will drive us there.

Too bad that we only have this weekend and next to focus on the fundamental importance of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us and in the midst of the Church. He is God getting things done. If we give

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him room to operate, everything else will take care of itself.