First I’d like to just share a few words addressing the sharp words at the beginning of today’s Gospel passage as regards salvation of those who don’t believe in the Good News of Jesus that the Apostles preached. It says that those who believe and are baptized will be saved and that those who do not believe will be condemned. That should make all of us who want good things for others squirm a bit. It’s a question just about all of us grapple with at some point in our young adulthood. Do you have to be Christian to get to heaven? I could tell you my own considered opinion which might or might not be similar to yours. Instead of that I’ll say some things that the Catholic Church teaches about that. Can a non-Christian get to heaven? Yes. How? Same as us—Jesus saves that person. Our Church teaches that Jesus is the unique savior of humankind, the mediator between heaven and earth. The Church also teaches that there are good and noble elements in the world’s great religions that can lead a person to God. But still, Jesus in the savior and the fullness of Truth lies in him.

One thing I remember liking very much to learn when I was a young adult was a concept described by a German theologian, Karl Rahner. He coined the term “Anonymous Christian” to refer to a person who does not profess belief in Jesus but who nonetheless leads a life based on Jesus command that we heard last week: Love one another. An anonymous Christian would be like the characters in that great parable of the Last Judgement in Matthew’s Gospel account. There were those who professed belief in Jesus but who did not feed the hungry, visit the sick and the prison and clothe the naked, and they were not allowed into the Kingdom of Heaven, but there were also those who had no idea they were serving Jesus when they did those very things who entered the Kingdom of Heaven. Anonymous Christians. It might sound a little arrogant to walk up to a Jewish person or a Buddhist person and say, “Hey, you’re an anonymous Christian!” Reportedly, Karl Rahner himself said that to a Buddhist person who quickly replied, “Well, I think you’re an anonymous Buddhist!” Rahner was impressed and said, “That’s exactly what you have to say!”

As with most all of our Church teaching, it’s a synthesis of the Bible as a whole and reflection and not just a matter of quoting a verse. One thing’s for sure: it’s God who decides, not us. So, I hope that’s interesting; I thought it was worth mentioning.

More important, I think, is what Mark describes as actions of signs that accompany a believer, actions that in fact confirm that you’re a true believer. It’s a surprising list, probably, to most of us. True believers will 1. Drive out Demons, 2. Speak new languages, 3. Pick of deadly serpents, 4. Survive the drinking of poison, and 5. Lay hands on the sick and heal them. Interesting, yes? There are indeed some brands of Christian churches that feature snake handling as part of their prayer services, in imitation of today’s passage.

I’m going to suggest that we would do well to take the substance of those five accompanying signs but update them to our age.

Maybe driving out demons means for us today that we should confront evil when they see it. Always being careful to note that we’re not all virtuous ourselves, when we see human dignity being threatened in the ways we treat one another, in families and in our world, we are called to promote compassion and fairness. It’s not so easy to speak up especially to a friend who is saying nasty things, for example.
Maybe speaking new languages means for us to **reach out to people in ways that are hard for us**. I remember trying to learn French in high school. I was handicapped by a great fear that I would sound stupid, so while I developed a decent ability to read and write it, I never learned to speak it very well. Do we dare reach out beyond our comfort zones to help others or just to grow ourselves?

**Maybe Picking up snakes is mostly about simply being courageous.** It’s one kind of courage to pick up a snake, and another to sincerely apologize and seek forgiveness when we’ve hurt someone else. In what situation this week do you need more courage to do something that would be very pleasing to God?

**Maybe drinking poison and surviving is mostly about developing a deep awareness of your deepest self where God dwells and where you are protected from all harm.** This is the part of us that Jesus speaks of when he says “I am the Resurrection and the Life, whoever believes in me will never die.” Of course, our bodies will die, but if you inhale a breath of life and light can you feel it touching something in you that will never die? Become aware and feed that part of you with love and prayer.

**Last, Maybe laying hands on people and curing them means for us simple acts of compassion.** Do we know who around us is hurting. Do we know how healing our loving attention can be for people?

So, these things are not as exciting as handling snakes and drinking poison, but on this Feast of the Ascension, we recognize that Jesus needs us still on earth to let our faith change us and urge us forward to say no to bad things, to be bold trying new things, to find courage in doing God’s will, nurture the eternal life he gives us, and, of course, to love one another with tender compassion.