

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD - MAY 15, 2021 OR MAY 16, 2021 Chattanooga

by Fr. Nick Tran

Forty days ago, we gathered here to celebrate Easter Sunday. When they found the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene and the apostles were sad and confused. Later Jesus appeared to them, showing them that He was still alive, did they believe and rejoice.

Now, forty days later, those disciples are in Galilee for Jesus' last appearance. This time, He will be ascending to Heaven to take His place at the right hand of the Father. As on Easter morning, the disciples are feeling sad and confused. They love Jesus and don't want to see Him leave. They also have questions about His Kingdom and when it will be established. After He ascends to Heaven, they stand around looking up, not knowing what to do. It takes two angels to snap them out of it and remind them of Jesus' promise that He would come back.

The question that was on many of the disciples' minds that day is probably the same question that many of us might ask. Why did Jesus have to leave? Why didn't He stay on earth to show everyone that He was risen so that they could believe?

The truth is that Jesus never really left. His ascension to Heaven does not mean that He is gone. Rather, it means that He is still present among us but in a different way. Jesus is still at work in the world through the community of those who believe in Him. He is present in the world through the Church.

Jesus promises the disciples in today's first reading that "they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witness...to the ends of the earth." And in today's gospel Jesus sends His disciples off into the world to preach the gospel and baptize every creature. And He promises them that great signs will accompany those who believe in Him. They will drive out demons, speak new languages, handle serpents, drink poison, and heal the sick.

The disciples are not called to do this by their own power. Rather it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that they are to do all these great works.

The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. He is fully God along with God the Father and God the Son. And we see Him at work in the life of Jesus. He is present at His baptism when He came down upon Jesus in the form of the dove. Saint Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the desert to do battle with Satan. And it was the Holy Spirit along with God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead. It is this same Spirit who is now given to us to carry out His mighty deeds and ensure that His presence continues on earth.

We receive the Holy Spirit first at our baptism. Then, the Holy Spirit's presence in us is strengthened through the Sacrament of Confirmation. All of us here have the Holy Spirit living

within us. We cannot always sense His presence, but we believe it through faith. We might not always understand when He is acting in and through us, but it is real nonetheless. Jesus promised us and the Church assures us that it is so.

So now it is up to us to carry on the work of Jesus. We must be the ones who pass on the message that He died for our sins and made it possible for us to be reconciled to God. We must be the ones to bring comfort to the sick, to feed the hungry, and to visit prisoners. It is up to us to make disciples of all people. Jesus has given us His Spirit to make all this possible. And He expects great things from us.

There is a saying: “You might be the only Jesus someone ever meets.” Would people know we believe in Jesus by the way we speak and act? Is it clear to those we meet that we are believers? Are we like Jesus?

That is our calling - to be Jesus’ presence in the world.

Of course, we often fall short and even fail miserably. It is to be expected. Our fallen human nature gets in the way of the Holy Spirit’s work in us. That is why Jesus left us another great sacrament - the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We can find forgiveness and be strengthened for our work of bringing the world to Christ.

Our failures can also serve another purpose. They remind us that we should rely on Jesus and His Holy Spirit rather than on our own intelligence and gifts. Our sinfulness can also keep us from getting proud and being judgmental. Only when we’re humble can God fully work through us. There is nothing like failing from time to time to keep us from getting carried away with ourselves.

Jesus did not leave us when He ascended to Heaven. He continues to be present and active through us. We are the ones who are carrying on His mission to preach the good news, baptize, and make disciples of the nations. That is only possible through His Spirit given to us in baptism and confirmation. **The more we allow the Holy Spirit to work in and through us, the more evident it will be to the world that Jesus Christ is alive. That is the great mission He left His apostles and now it has been handed down to us.**

On Pentecost, we will gather here again to celebrate the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. These days leading up to Pentecost are traditionally a time for us to pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit to renew the Church and make our mission to the world more successful. Let us join all Christians in doing that during these next few days. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to form us into the image of Jesus so that it will be clear to the world that He is not gone but that He is very much present and active in our world today. **Keep in mind that Jesus is present with us all the time through the Sacrament of the Eucharist.**