

The Ascension of the Lord

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 8, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

It may seem strange to us, but if you notice, the gospel lesson doesn't say anything about the ascension of Jesus and in fact, when you look at the other gospels, Mark's gospel has no account of the ascension and John's gospel doesn't mention anything about an ascension of Jesus 40 days after Easter. In fact, in John's gospel, it's on Easter Sunday night that Jesus comes back to the disciples and during that visit, he breaths on them and fills them with the Holy Spirit, as we will celebrate next Sunday on the feast of Pentecost. Everything is combined into the one experience of those disciples.

We might find this somewhat confusing and strange. Luke does mention it in his gospel and of course, Luke was the author of the Acts of the Apostles, so he spells out in some detail how he sees the end of the life of Jesus and his departure from Earth. But what this reminds us of, if we notice how the different gospels almost seem to contradict one another, that the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, the letters of Paul and the others, are not historical documents as we think of historical documents.

They weren't trying to write down everything about the life of Jesus as we might try to write a biography of some important person today. What they were interested in was the truth behind what happened to Jesus and what Jesus did -- the truth revealed to us by God. Matthew is concerned, I think, because as he mentions when they had gathered there at the mountain in Galilee, some doubted. The first disciples were still confused. They really couldn't put everything together about Jesus.

We, I think, too easily accept what we think happened to Jesus, how it happened, and so on. We really lose the sense of the mystery of how extraordinary and unbelievable, in a way, everything about Jesus is. We find it too easy to believe, I think, because we don't really try to probe the mystery, but those first disciples were confused and some even, as the end of the gospel says, doubted: "Who is Jesus, what is he, what's this about?"

So Matthew then is trying to reassure his community: "It's all right." The confusion, it will clear up if you simply remember what Matthew says at the very end of the gospel, the words Jesus spoke to his disciples at the Last Supper, "I will be with you." Even though I have been put to death, now somehow you'll experience me as alive again, but you don't see me all the time. I'm not with you every day like I used to be, but know that I am still with you.

John, in his gospel, was trying to make it very clear that Jesus was with them, and that Jesus did fulfill the promise that he had made at the Last Supper again when he spoke to them for the last time, "I will send you another paraclete, the spirit." John brings that forth immediately, that Jesus imparts the Holy Spirit upon his disciples. John wants his community to be aware that Jesus is "still among us through the spirit of Jesus who lives within us."

Luke had a totally different agenda. Luke wrote much later than Matthew and Mark. John's gospel was probably written after Luke's, but Luke was not written until about the year 80 or so. Luke was trying to impress upon his community and the disciples at that time that there was some urgency about what Jesus had said to his disciples. So Luke reminds them at the beginning of that passage from the Acts today, that "You will be my witnesses and you will be witness to me in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, even to the ends of the earth. You will be my witnesses."

But here it was, 50 years later, and the disciples, the church, was still not really spreading, doing the witnessing that Jesus had expected. So Luke devises this very marvelous picture where the disciples come together after they have had many experiences of Jesus during 40 days, and then Luke says he gathers them all together and imparts a blessing upon them; then he leaves and the angels come as we heard in the passage.

They say, "Why are you standing around doing nothing? Why are you looking up to the heavens? It's time to go out to begin spreading the gospel of Jesus. It's time to be the witnesses you're called to be." So Luke is very insistent that you must begin to proclaim the good news, witness to the good news, live a life that shows the values of Jesus so everyone begins to understand the message that he came into the world to bring us, and that that message spreads and that message begins to transform the world so that we have the reign of God break forth in his fullness.

That's why Luke describes everything the way he does. He's trying to get across a message to the community of disciples of his day, and it's a message that's very important for us to hear because in a sense, I think maybe we could say about each of us individually, about our church, we still are a long way from witnessing to the true message of Jesus, all the values that Jesus came to show us that are so different from the values of the world around us.

I thought that one way to make it clear, the sort of thing that Jesus does ask of us, is to speak about a feast day that's coming up this month for the first time in the history of the church. It's a new feast day. May 21st will be the feast of a martyr, Franz Jagerstatter, who is a modern witness. Most of us probably haven't even heard of Franz Jagerstatter. I have a holy card here that was distributed at the time that Pope Benedict, last October, beatified him and made May 21st his feast day.

This was a person who lived in Austria during the time of Hitler. That was a time, of course, when Germany took over Austria so all Austrian citizens became citizens of Germany. That was a time, of course, when Hitler was moving out into Europe trying to conquer all the countries of Europe, trying to conquer the world, in fact. That was when Hitler preached an ideology of hate, and that was when the Holocaust was taking place against the Jews. That was a time when most of the church was silent.

Franz Jagerstatter was this Austrian peasant, a farmer, not educated, certainly not beyond high school, but he was educated in the gospel. He read the gospels carefully. He came to know Jesus so when it came time for him to be conscripted into Hitler's army, he refused. On Aug. 9, 1943, he was beheaded because to refuse to serve in the army was treason. But he was such an extraordinary person that he was the only one in his village who said no to Hitler.

Hardly anyone throughout all of Germany said no to Hitler. Even his parish priest tried to convince him, "It's

your responsibility, it's your duty to your country to serve in the army." The bishop told him the same thing, "You must go," even though now we all easily recognize, it would have been totally wrong to kill on behalf of Hitler. But very few people back then understood that, or if they did understand it, very few had the courage to be the witness to the way of Jesus that Franz knew he had to be.

He could not kill for Hitler or for anyone, so he stood up and was this witness. He did what Jesus had asked all his disciples to do, "Go and be my witness in Jerusalem and Judea, to the ends of the earth." We're called to do the same thing today; maybe not quite in as dramatic a fashion as Franz Jagerstatter, but there are many ways in which the world in which we live, even the things our government sometimes asks us to do, that would go against the way of Jesus.

We have to understand that, that our culture isn't always leading us in the way of Jesus, and our national policies aren't always leading us in the way of Jesus. How do we sort that out? One of the things we need to do is what Franz did -- read the scriptures, read the gospels, come to know Jesus and understand that his way is a very special way.

We also need the courage to stand up against common opinion, stand up against what most people think or do and do what Jesus would expect of us. In fact, a book written about Franz is called this: *In Solitary Witness*. Franz was a solitary witness in his village, most of Austria and most of Germany. Even if it's necessary for us to be solitary in our witness, it's important that we try to hear the message of today, the message that Luke gives us in that first lesson.

It's time to stop looking up into the heavens. It's time to live the way of Jesus. Perhaps the prayer that St. Paul spoke in our second lesson today is a very important prayer that we might hear Paul praying for us now:

"May the God of Jesus be revealed to you and give you a spirit of wisdom that you may know Jesus. May God enlighten your inner vision that you may appreciate the things we hope for, and may God give you the courage to live the way of Jesus."

That's our prayer today as we celebrate this feast of the ascension and hear Jesus asking us to go and be his witnesses today by living according to his way.

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