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Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 11, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

The Easter candle, of course, is and has been for the last 40 days the ttsymbol of the presence of the living, risen Jesus in our midst. With the simple ttaction of carrying the candle away, we symbolize what we celebrate in this ttfeast today: Jesus in his physical presence on earth has definitively left his ttdisciples.

In the Acts of the Apostles, St Luke takes a lot of time to say the very ttsame thing through the symbolic raising of his body up into heaven, clouds come

ttimportant for us not to be too distracted by those symbols, because in fact as ttwe know from Luke's account of the gospel, actually Jesus rose and ttascended back to God on Easter Sunday. During a period of time, he would appear ttoff and on to the disciples, but he was gone; his death was definitive and when tthe rose to new life he reunited with God in heaven forever.

It must have been hard for those disciples to accept the reality that he ttwas gone. In fact, as Luke describes it in the Acts of The Apostles, they tthadn't really been able to hear what he had told them. Throughout his ttpublic life, a number of times, people wanted to make him the king, restore the ttkingdom of David in all its glory. Establish Jesus as a powerful king on earth, ttto bring about the reign of God. And even now at the very end -- as we hear ttLuke describe it -- they are saying to him: "Is now the time when you are ttgoing to restore the kingdom?" It's hard for them to think that tthe's going to be gone.

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He had told them -- as it is recorded in John's Gospel -- at the ttlast supper that he would leave them, but it seems again that they weren't ttable to hear what he says. He said, "Indeed believe me, it's better ttfor you that I go away, because as long as I do not leave, the Holy Spirit, the ttAdvocate, will not come. But if I go away I will send the Spirit to ttyou."

It was so clear, and yet they found it so hard to believe. Maybe part of ttthe reason was that they did not really want to accept that he wasn't, in

tthis physical life on earth, to bring about the fullness of God's reign.
ttThat was to be their responsibility. "You will be my witnesses, in
ttJerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. You will be
ttmy witnesses, the ones proclaiming the good news about God's reign and how
ttthat reign will come about." It will come about according to the way that
ttJesus lived and died, not through physical power or violence or wealth or
ttearthly armies or kingdoms of the earth. It will come about as people learn to
ttlive according to his way, the way of love.

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That's a very difficult task that he left for his disciples and of
ttcourse it's not completed yet. And so those words in the first lesson
tttoday are being spoken not just 2,000 years ago but right now. It's a
ttliving word, God's word. God is speaking to us this morning, you, each of
ttus are to be my witnesses. We are the ones that have the task to transform our
ttworld, to try to transform hatred and violence through love so that peace can
tthappen.

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We are the ones who are to spread the message about Jesus. All that he
ttwas, all that he taught, all that he stands for. We have to do that first of
ttall as Jesus suggests by being witnesses. That is we have to take in the
ttmessage, we have to transform our lives so that our very lives speak the
ttmessage of Jesus. Not just our words but our lives, the way we live. We become
ttwitnesses to Jesus and everywhere we go we spread his message and bring about
ttthe transformation of the world.

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We might think it's beyond us, to be able to this. But then we
ttreally need to hear what St. Paul tells those Christians at Ephesus. I suppose
ttin a sense, he had established that church, he had proclaimed the good news, he
tthad brought about the conversion of many of these gentiles in Ephesus, and
ttprobably they had become dependent upon him. But now he's in jail, and so
ttthey have to do it. They probably were lacking in confidence, and that's
ttwhat he tells them, "That Jesus from heaven sends his gifts. To some he
ttgave to be apostles, others prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, so he
ttprepared those who belonged to him for ministry." Jesus prepares us in the
ttsame way, and it can happen, if we accept that we are gifted by God and begin
ttto use those gifts.

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In fact, I think it?s very significant in a way that I was gone last
Sunday because I was in Haiti. And one of the reasons I was there was that

I was working to continue in the effort to bring Fr. Gérard Jean-Juste back to his ttparish. He’s in jail, conditionally released to receive medical treatment ttwhich he needs so desperately, but he’s in jail. And yet when I went to tthis parish, St. Clare parish in one of the slum areas of Port-au-Prince, it was ttamazing to see all that is going in that parish. Their pastor is in jail, but ttone of the days I was there the church was half filled with young people who ttwere being prepared for First Holy Communion. There was no priest there to ttprepare them, but the people, the leaders of the parish were doing it.

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When I celebrated Mass the choir was there and they sang with great ttpower and joyfulness. And all the works of service are going on. In fact they tthave increased. You know that Fr. Gérard has been gone from that parish since ttlast July when he was arrested and put in jail. But everything goes on, because ttthe people, and these are very poor people that I suppose that a lot of us ttwould say, “Well how could they ever keep it going.” Well they have. ttThey have kept it going, because people have stepped forward, taken roles of ttleadership. They act as evangelists, preaching the gospel, living the gospel. ttThey do the ministry of education and teaching. They do the ministry of ttreaching out to those who have no food. In fact, over the past few months the ttnumbers they serve a full meal -- well, it’s not exactly a full meal. ttIt’s beans and rice and little bit of chicken -- they serve now up to 800 ttpeople a day.

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It’s amazing all that keeps going in that parish. And it’s ttbecause the people there have heard that they are the ones who are to be the ttwitnesses, the ones who are to carry on the work of Jesus. To proclaim the good ttnews. To make the good news happen. And it’s happening there.

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I hope that all of us will begin to take very seriously this message. In tta way, this feast day could distract us. We could look at that window over ttthere [which depicts the Ascension], and spend our time thinking about how did ttJesus rise up on that cloud and so on, and where’s heaven? Up there ttsomeplace? All of that speculation is absurd really. The message is: “You ttare the witnesses. Get out and go to work.” That’s what Jesus wants ttus to hear, and we need to take it in.

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That makes me want to say a word about what I mentioned before Mass. ttNext Sunday we’ll be trying to draw forth new leaders for our parish. I

tthope each one of us will prayerfully consider, “maybe my name should be in
ttthat basket from which we draw the names of the leaders,” “maybe God
ttis asking me to take a further role of leadership in this parish
ttcommunity.” I hope we will think about that. Whether we become a member of
ttthe leadership of the parish council or not, nevertheless each of us still I
tthope will leave the church today hearing Jesus tell us “you are to be my
ttwitnesses.” That’s the message of the Ascension this feast day. Go
ttout into the world and by your very life proclaim the good news: God is love,
ttand love can transform this world if we all live according to the way of
ttGod.

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Go and be my witnesses. That’s the message of this feast.

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