

## Ascension

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Today is the Feast of the Ascension, celebrating when Jesus ascended into heaven forty days after rising from the dead. We are coming to the conclusion of the Paschal Mystery, not only the passion, death, and rising of Jesus, but also his Ascension into heaven and his sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which we celebrate next week.

A Jesuit can't preach about the Ascension without telling a story from the life of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. Soon after his conversion—which, by the way, occurred 500 years ago this coming month—Ignatius, full of zeal but lacking in good sense and moderation, was in the Holy Land. The Franciscans, who oversaw the holy places, saw that he was going to be a troublemaker, so they required that he leave on the next ship. Ignatius was about to board when he realized that when he had visited the site of the Ascension and seen the impression of Jesus' feet in the rock from which he had gone up, he could not remember in what direction the feet pointed. In his zeal he had to find out. So Ignatius snuck back to the place, bribed his way into the gated area, saw which direction the impression of the feet pointed, and at that moment was grabbed by the scruff of his neck by a husky Franciscan and hustled unceremoniously back to the ship, happy to be so treated as Jesus had been treated. (You wonder what Pope Francis, the Jesuit, makes of this story of how the first Jesuit was manhandled by his namesake Franciscans!)

I could have told Ignatius in which direction the feet of the ascending Jesus pointed. They pointed toward him and they point toward us. What the Ascension means is not that Jesus departed from us, from the earth, but rather that he disappeared. He disappeared from one place and one time, so that he might present in all places and in all times, in the places of our lives and the times of our days. Indeed the feet of the disappearing Jesus point toward us.

I love what today's Gospel of Mark says:

So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. But they (the disciples) went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.

The Lord Jesus was able to send them forth because he had not departed but only disappeared, to go with them, to work with them, and to confirm their words and works of faith through accompanying signs. He could do this because he had gone to the Father, to receive the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, sent the Spirit upon those who believe, went with them in his Spirit, and confirmed their ministry and service by giving signs that accompanied what they did. This was true of the disciples who watched him lifted up and a cloud take him from their sight, and it is true of us. The feet of the ascending Jesus point toward us, our lives, what we are sent by him to do, we with whom he now works and who confirms our lives of faith with accompanying signs.

What are those accompanying signs of the presence of Christ in our lives? Mark speaks of dramatic ones like driving out demons, picking up deadly serpents and not being hurt, drinking poison and not being harmed. Maybe those were good and needed for the first generation to launch the disciples of Jesus. There are still signs today that show Jesus accompanies us and confirms our lives of faith. I prefer them. They are things like kindness, goodness, generosity, care for others, compassion, perseverance, faithfulness, humility, peace, gentleness, and joy. You find them all around and within your parish community in the hungry fed, the troubled calmed, the lonely accompanied, the rejected welcomed.

I remember a strong sign confirming faith in my experience. My mother was 96 and in Providence Hospital, when in the middle of the night they needed to do a sudden emergency surgery and gave her a 50% chance of surviving it. I was there with my Dad and brother. I, as a priest, wanted an alone moment with my Mom, to help her face death, so I shoed my Dad and brother out of the room and said to my Mom: "Mom, do you realize you may die? Are you afraid?" She said, "No, Steve, I am not afraid, God will take care of us." There was an accompanying confirming-of-faith sign, of the presence of Jesus, who indeed had not departed. A much better sign than not being harmed by deadly serpents or poisonous drink! I have long thought of that little word "us" rather than "me". "God will take care of us", of a mother and her priest son. She ministered to me at that critical moment beyond not only her fears but even more so beyond mine. The feet of the ascending Jesus pointed in my direction. By the way, she survived and lived to 100 and 6 months. Perhaps she too, like Jesus ascending, has not departed but only disappeared as have our beloved who have gone before us.

What in our lives fulfills the concluding words of the Gospel after Jesus disappears:

(The disciples) went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.

How is the risen Christ working with you in your life? How is he confirming your faith? How is the Lord showing you signs that he is accompanying you? I suggest we not look for the big, but for the small signs; not for signs far away but near at hand; perhaps not look even to those now with us, but to those who like Jesus have not departed but have disappeared.

Let me end with a little poem by Marjorie Saiser about some signs she experiences. It's called "If I Carry My Father".

If I carry my father  
 I hope it is a little more  
 than color of hair  
 or the dimple or cheek bones  
 if he's ever here in the space I inhabit  
 the room I walk in  
 the boundaries and peripheries  
 I hope it's some kindness he believed in  
 living on in cell or bone  
 maybe some word or action  
 will float to the surface

within my reach  
some good will rise when I need it  
a hard dense insoluble shard  
will show up  
and carry on.

Let's look this Ascension Day, for the signs of the Lord in our lives and be confirmed of his presence with us. He has not departed; he has only disappeared in order to be with us.