

The Ascension of the Lord

Acts 1: 1-11

Ephesians 1:17-23

Matthew 28: 16-20

Welcome back. We missed you. It has been 60 days since Archbishop Coakley, like bishops all over the country (and indeed the world), temporarily suspended all public Masses as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. One day we were going about our normal daily routine and overnight everything changed. And though we resumed public Masses this week and this is our first Sunday Mass (with a congregation) in over seven weeks we do so carefully and with many safety precautions because what stopped quickly will take much longer to restart.

I want to acknowledge the parish staff and all the volunteers who have helped us this week with the implementation of all the new procedures. I am so lucky to work with such amazing people. Even when the offices were closed, they never stopped working and responded to needs as they came up with a positive and helpful attitude.

I want to thank all of you who have continued to support our parish with your generous monetary contributions. Your commitment to St. Francis and to the ministry we do (which must be done at all times) is appreciated.

And I would like to thank those who tuned in to our live-stream (or at least “tried” to tune in) and were patient with all our technical difficulties. Just as you were frustrated at home with all the buffering believe me, we were equally frustrated here. We wanted nothing more than to connect with you in any way we could but, as with the pandemic so also with technology, we are not always in control. No matter how many changes and improvements we made there always seemed to be something (hmm, Cox) getting in our way (ahem, Cox). Yet, we never gave up nor let it get in the way of proclaiming the gospel and we will continue to live-stream for those of you who are still at home.

Again, welcome back. I missed you.

As we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord, perhaps you might understand it differently given everything we have been through this year and better appreciate what the apostles were feeling when Jesus left their sight and ascended into heaven. They were a little awestruck and confused. The man they had depended on had left their sight.

It never crossed my mind, when I was ordained a priest almost 23 years ago, that there would come a day when I would not be able to celebrate Mass in public. That churches would close and people would have to stay at home for two full months. I never thought, back then, that someday in the future I would have to wear a mask, a surgical gown, gloves and a shield in order to give Last Rites to a person with a virus called COVID-19. And it was beyond my imagination that I would become one of those TV evangelists (the Catholic version of it, of course) and have a YouTube channel!

Having to face these new realities, albeit temporary, was very disorienting, but almost from the beginning something came over me and I jumped right in and I wasn't alone. Many of my brother priests did the same. We didn't exactly know how or what to do but we made the most of it and hoped for the best.

I'm sure you had a similar experience. Many of you have been attending Mass every Sunday morning (or Saturday evening) or a weekday for a very long time. You had your routine and schedule. Many of you rightly relied on the Church for your spiritual nourishment, especially the Eucharist, and this parish for support but suddenly your routine changed, the support you knew was unavailable and you could not receive communion. It must have been disorienting and uncomfortable for you as well. But you made the most of it and did what you could to remain connected to the faith and positive through these uncharted territories.

When we are faced with situations that are beyond our control and the things we once depended upon (and still long for) are taken away that's when we must rely on the Holy Spirit. Just like the apostles. Before Jesus ascended into heaven—the disciples wanted to know if he was going to restore the kingdom to Israel but Jesus said to them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Disoriented, confused and uncertain the apostles made the most of their situation. Sure at first they were scared and locked themselves in an upper room but with the help of the Holy Spirit they did what the Lord had commanded them, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” He didn't promise them that it would be easy or that it would be what they expected or that they would be able to operate in normal conditions. No, all he said was, “Go, make disciples.”

I spoke to a gentleman this week on the phone who asked me, “Father, what do you think we've learned from this experience? What is the Lord telling us amid this situation?” It

was a good question and one I didn't exactly know how to answer, but I guess I would say that what I learned and what I will take away from this experience (even as we are still dealing with it) is a greater dependence upon God.

So often we lose sight of our dependence or need for God. We depend more on ourselves or on material things or our experience or our knowledge to get us through the day but when these things are taken away or they change dramatically we feel lost and abandoned, just like the apostles. But if we trust in the Lord and depend upon him then we will not only SURVIVE life's challenges, we will THRIVE!

We tend to think of the ascension as Jesus going to another place, heaven, and the scriptures don't help us much in this area with the image we heard in the first reading of the apostles "looking intently at the sky." But remember, two men in white garments appeared to them and asked, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you...will return." And Jesus tells them in the gospel, "I am with you always, until the end of the age."

This tells us that the ascended Jesus is not in another place (away from us and separated) but in another realm where he can be present in all time and in all places.

My brothers and sisters, we are bound by time and space. We are limited beings and subject to our surroundings and temptations. Jesus, who ascended into heaven, is not bound to a time or a place but present through all time and in all places. Learning to depend on him and trust in him above all things, like the apostles, we will know the surpassing greatness of the power he has for us who believe.

Very Rev. William L. Novak, V.G.

May 23, 2020