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Companions on the Journey

May 22, 2022

Dear Friends,

Each year we celebrate the feast of the Ascension of Our Lord into heaven. To me, this feast is one of the least understood and least accepted feasts of Our Lord. What is the Ascension? And what does it mean? What, if any, are the practical effects on our lives as Twenty-first century Catholics?

Where to begin? Let's start with the resurrection of Our Lord. When Jesus first appears in that Upper Room on the first Easter Sunday night reports had already come to the apostles that the tomb in which Jesus' body had been placed when taken down from the cross of Calvary, was empty. Peter and John had been to the tomb. Empty it was. The burial cloths were there, as well as the head covering placed over his face. But his body was nowhere to be found. What did it mean? How did it happen? Was his body stolen? If so, who did it? And why? And if someone did steal the body, how did they get past the guards who had been posted there? And, of course, who would take the time to unwrap a body dead for many hours, a body that died covered in blood and body fluids, and leave behind the burial cloths and just take the naked body? None of that made sense.

Until, of course, Jesus starts to appear to people. Then they began to say: He is alive. He lives! He is risen! And then they began to remember some of the predictions he had made especially about himself. Belief began to grow that he was not take. He was risen. He is risen. He lives. And he appears to various people and groups of people. But not every day and sometimes there are weeks in between appearances. And no one is sure of what they are supposed to do now that he is risen but not with them the way he used to be "with them."

Jesus himself had said that he would not leave them orphaned. That he would abide with them. But he also said that it would be better for them if he were to go. Go where? Go when? Ah, now we draw close to the moment of Ascension. While Jesus' primary part in our redemption and salvation was drawing to a close, the other and ongoing dimension of our redemption and salvation was beginning. It was the time of the Holy Spirit. The Father and the Son would breathe their own Holy Spirit into the hearts and souls of those who believed in Jesus and loved Jesus. The Father and the Son would do that together. The Son would return to the Father who had sent him on this mission to begin with. Once reunited then together the sending forth of the Holy Spirit could commence.

How is the Son reunited with the Father in heaven? The Ascension. It is a triumphant homecoming for the obedient and faithful and victorious but scarred Son. The Ascension is the Son returning to the Father so that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit could take place. And so, the Son (on the fortieth day) returns to the Father. And when the nine days (the first novena) of prayer and fasting were complete, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the believing community. And the Holy Spirit has been enlivening, inspiring, enlightening, empowering all who believe in Christ ever since. That Holy Spirit is poured out again in very baptism, in every confirmation, in every ordination, in every anointing of the sick.

Jesus' Ascension into heaven is the catalyst for all this, the condition for the possibility for the Holy Spirit to live in us. It was the necessary final gift of the Son to us. That is why the Ascension of Our Lord is a Holy Day. It is holy indeed. Without the Holy Spirit given to us and indwelling the soul of each believer we would have no hope and no possibility of living the life Jesus laid out for us. The Holy Spirit is central to our lives. The Ascension was necessary for the gift of the Spirit.

In the Peace of Christ,

Msgr. McHenry