

Ascension of the Lord (2011)

(Acts 1:1-11; Eph 1:17-23; Matt 28:16-20)

I suspect that many of you came here today expecting to celebrate the Seventh Sunday of Easter and are surprised to find we are celebrating Ascension. As the old-timers among you remember, there were at one time six holy days of obligation: three C's (Christmas, Circumcision, and Immaculate Conception) and three A=s (All Saints, Assumption, and Ascension). Because the Church considered Ascension very important, but often not observed during the week, it allowed bishops to transfer the observance to the following Sunday. The bishops of America chose to follow that permission.

The biblical texts on Our Lord=s Ascension, as also on the resurrection, are rich and closely connected. St. Matthew, the first of our gospels, depicts an angel at the tomb telling the holy women that Jesus has risen from the tomb, has gone to Galilee, and that the disciples should meet Him there. I picture them on the way there, St. Thomas grousing every step of the way that they are crazy to believe the women until, seeing the Risen One, he calls out, **AMy Lord and my God!@** Matthew does not describe an ascension but that would certainly follow from Jesus= command to proclaim the gospel, to baptize, and the promise to be with them to the end of the age.

It was no doubt Luke's chronology in Acts 1:3 of Jesus appearing to the disciples **Aduring forty days@** that

suggested Thursday to the Church as ascension day.

The most beautiful of the resurrection accounts, certainly my favorite, is that told by the fourth evangelist. Mary Magdalen comes to the tomb, finds it empty, runs to Peter and John (beloved disciple), tells them, “they have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don=t know where they put him.@ These two run to the tomb, Peter arrives first and is apparently content to verify Mary=s report but for the Beloved (ideal) Disciple the empty tomb is enough, for **A**he saw and believed@ [that Jesus had risen] (20:8).

Mary remains outside the tomb weeping, now sees within two angels, then Jesus, outside, whom she doesn=t recognize until He addresses her by name, **A**Mary.@ The evangelist doesn=t tell us how the Beloved Disciple reacts to the realization that His Lord is risen, but Mary=s reaction he indicates well enough by relating her word and deed. Not only is He alive but to live forever more; she exclaims **A**Rabbouni!@ Jesus’ words tell the story: **A**Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, >I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God=@**B**a commission John tells us she carried out.

The next scene in John=s gospel, **A**On the evening of that first day of the week,@ that is, that Easter Sunday, Jesus appears to the disciples and bestows on them the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2:33, Peter, in his preaching of the good news proclaims that Jesus **A**exalted at the right hand of God, ... received the promise of the holy Spirit from the

Father and poured it forth@ (Acts 2:33). So on John=s reckoning, Ascension took place on Easter Sunday. So if you have any scruples about celebrating Ascension on Sunday, your defense is that you are following the chronology of John in his gospel rather than Luke=s in his Acts of the Apostles.

Moreover, you can argue that Luke, in Acts, is inconsistent with Luke in his gospel. In his gospel the holy women go to the tomb early, find it empty but encounter angels who tell them **A**He has been raised.@ They reported this to the apostles, who treat it as nonsense and will not believe them. **A**Now that very day@ occurs the same day as the wonderful encounter of Jesus with two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus. They do not recognize Him, but He convinces them from the Scriptures that **A**it was necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and so enter into his glory, and then, at table, they recognize Him at the breaking of the bread.@ Returned to Jerusalem, they report this to the others, only to learn that He had also appeared to Peter.

While they were talking about this, Jesus appeared in their midst. After He had convinced them it was truly Him, He led them out as far as Bethany and as He blessed them, He parted from them and was taken up to heaven**B**all this on Easter Sunday.

We should not be surprised if there seem to be conflicts in the accounts of the resurrection and the ascension. They are not simple **A**events@: the resurrection

is not **A**he is alive, he is dead, he is alive@ nor is going to heaven a case of local motion: one does not get to heaven by going up; it is about the exaltation of Jesus to His throne at God=s right hand. They are mysteries, even to those who witnessed them; the witnesses reported them as they perceived them: glorious, beautiful, and highly significant. John can describe resurrection, ascension, and even the descent of the Spirit almost as one event because they are so closely joined, whereas Luke can emphasize the multiplicity of post-resurrection appearances as spread out in time, over days. Luke=s scenario in Acts is useful and has become **A**canonical,@ but we see it is possible to telescope the three events almost as one.

This is important in itself but it is also highly significant. Both our own resurrection and our own glorification are present reality, even if we do not fully experience that now. What must we do to have this share in Christ=s glory? Nothing, according to St. Paul: **A**For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God.” What is required of us is gratitude for so great a gift and, of course, to observe His one commandment, to love one another as He has loved us. As Paul says in another place, **A**If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you, too, will appear with Him in glory” (Col 3:1-4).

