

WITNESSES TO THE END OF THE EARTH

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian, angel intercede for me.

The Acts of the Apostles tells us all about those absolutely luminous days that Our Lord spent with the disciples, his risen- his risen presence. He was teaching them and they were learning everything they needed to know for their mission, the mission that he was entrusting to them because he knew he was going to ascend into Heaven. Maybe they weren't fully aware of this, they were just getting ready for this great mission. He was opening up horizons and, of course, with Jesus there were no improvisations, success comes from carefully planning and then rigorous and constant execution of that plan. And, well, they were being prepared for Pentecost even though they probably didn't fully understand what was going on. And so, today, we celebrate the Feast of the Ascension, that is, Jesus going up. But Pentecost is him in the Holy Spirit coming down. And the Holy Spirit has a purpose, to move our- our minds, to look up and to continue to be with Jesus in Heaven.

There's a beautiful excerpt I read from St. Augustine, how he felt sad by Jesus' leaving in the Ascension. This is from his homilies on the Ascension. He says, "Today Our Lord Jesus Christ ascended in to Heaven. Let our hearts ascend with him. Listen," he says to the words of the Apostle, "if you have risen with Christ, set your hearts on the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God; seek the things that are above, not the things on Earth for you. For just as he remained with us, even after his Ascension, so too are we already in Heaven with Him, even though what is promised us has not yet been fulfilled in our bodies. Christ," he says, this as St. Augustine, "Christ is now exalted above the heavens, but he still suffers on Earth all the pain that we the members of his body have to bear. He showed this when he cried out from above, 'Saul, Saul, why why do you persecute me.' And when he said, 'I was hungry and you gave me food.'"

So that- that call of Jesus to St. Paul when he was on his way to Damascus was the Risen Jesus after the Ascension when he was seated at the right hand of God the Father. Of course, he was fully alive. He's exalted in Heaven so that he can truly be our intercessor. And of course, he was the guy- he was the one responsible for the conversion of St. Paul because he's our mediator. But let us- let us try to really understand the mystery of the Ascension.

I went to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, number 662, has a pretty good and actually quite dense explanation. It says, quoting from St. John, it says, "And I- when I am lifted up from the Earth will draw all men to myself." It says, "The lifting up of Jesus on the Cross signifies and announces his lifting up by his Ascension into Heaven. And indeed, begins it. Jesus Christ, the one priest of the new and eternal covenant, entered into the sanctuary made by human hands but into Heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf." And that's quoting from the Letter to the Hebrews. "There Christ permanently exercises his priesthood, for he always lives to make intercession for those who draw near to God through him as high priest of the good things to come. He is the center and the principal actor of the liturgy that honors the Father in Heaven."

Well, it's a- it's a pretty dense quote about Jesus exercising his priesthood, his mediation from Heaven. And St. John also uses the simple and straightforward words, "No one has ever gone into Heaven except the one who came from Heaven, the Son of Man." And so, ultimately, the Ascension has a salvific purpose. He left for salvific reasons, even if the Apostles, well, we can understand must have felt sorrow when you said to them, in St. John those rather painful words. He said, "Very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I'm going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you."

So it was maybe difficult for them to understand, you know, why can't you just stay with us, right? But, of course, they came to understand it with time. And even at the beginning, they- they were actually filled with joy because they somehow understood that the Ascension will glorify his body too. And that- that's what happens when he returns to the Father. That's why it is indeed an occasion of joy for the Apostles. It kind of opens the way for us too. But it's not a departure. There's a radical difference between a disappearance and a departure. With the Ascension, Jesus has not in fact departed. He's not become, let's say, absent. He's only disappeared from our sight. In fact, it was a cloud that hid him from their sight. Christ's ascension means that he no longer belongs to the world of corruption and death, that- that really condition our life. It means that he belongs entirely to God. He, the Eternal Son, leads our human existence into the presence of God, taking with him flesh and blood in a now transfigured form.

This idea that he simply is hidden from view but he's still present can be shown in some of the early representations of the Ascension in Christian art. I think of a famous woodcut from a 16th century German artist, his name was Albrecht Durer, a German artist. He had a big studio and he produced a lot of beautiful etchings and drawings and woodcuts. And in one of these famous ones of the Ascension, it shows the Blessed Virgin Mary with the rest of the Apostles all kneeling down looking up into the clouds above them. And just below the clouds, sticking out from the clouds, we see just the feet of Jesus, we don't see anybody- any body, just his feet. And only his feet are there at the heads of the Apostles. And the clouds, well, they form a kind of dark circle on the perimeter of this

drawing. And then, on the inside, we just see this blazing light. And what is even more amazing in this drawing, in this woodcut, rather, is that we can see on the ground the actual footprints of Jesus that are like left embedded on the Earth.

So, what does all this signify, because they're looking up, and they just see the feet. So they know he's still there even though they can't really see him. It means this, that all we see of Christ in the time of history are his feet and the cloud, that is, his feet. What are they? Well, we are reminded, first of all, of a particular sentence from the Resurrection account in Matthew's Gospel where it is said that the women held on to the feet of the Risen Lord and they worshipped him. Or, Mary Magdalene, she addresses him as *Rabboni*, meaning, *teacher*, and she wants to touch him, to hold him. But the Lord says, "Do not hold me for I have not yet ascended to the Father." That's kind of surprising, don't-what I mean, don't hold me. And we would have thought that now, while he's standing there before her, she can indeed touch him and hold him. And when he is ascended to the Father, of course, this will no longer be possible. But the Lord says the opposite, "Now she cannot touch him or hold him." That is, the earlier way of relating to the early Jesus is no longer possible.

And so Pope Benedict has said that what Jesus is doing is in one way, in fact, an even greater gift than his actual life on Earth was. He came down, of course, because he pre-existed as God. He's the eternal God, the second person of the Blessed Trinity. So he came down for a time on Earth but now he's going back up, not all of a sudden, like a distant planet, or, like, into the stars, but into the heavenly realm, where he can oversee everything and intercede for us as the sole mediator between God. This is how Pope Benedict describes it. He says, "The departing of Jesus does not make his way to some distant star. He enters into communion- into communion of power, and life with the living God, into God's dominion over space. Hence, he has not "gone away" but now and forever by God's own power he is present with us and for us. When Jesus was taken up from- from the Apostles' sight by the cloud, this does not mean that he was transported to another cosmic location, but that he was taken up in- into God's very being, participating in God's powerful presence in the world."

So, the cloud has the role of hiding him, of kind of blocking our sight. But he's still very much there, just like- like the sun is still there even on a cloudy day. The clouds seem to hide the light. They're filled with rain and- and maybe that makes it feel a little bit miserable. In fact, I've heard that psychologists do a test asking- they ask people whether they're happy and they always get better results on sunny days and- because there we can see the sun. So we must really rethink this. Clouds seem to hide him. But also, they tell us, ultimately, that he is truly, truly God.

I mean, where else do we see clouds in the Gospel? Well, we see one cloud in the Transfiguration, where Jesus shows himself as God and the Apostles are amazed, they're super happy when they see Elijah and Moses. Or Mary, when she has that exchange with the- the angel Gabriel and he

announces to her that the Holy Spirit will overshadow you with the power of the Most High—overshadow, what the cloud does. Or, think of the Holy Tent of God in the Old Testament, where the cloud signified the Lord's presence. The same Lord, who in the form of a cloud, led the people of Israel during their journey through the desert. So, this reference to the cloud is unambiguously theological language, maybe we have lost that a little bit. But certainly, the people of Israel would have understood this. It presents Jesus' departure not as a journey to the stars but as his entry into the mystery of God, the entry into the mystery of God— that's what the clouds signify. And so it evokes an entirely different order of magnitude, a different dimension of being. Lord, you had to go to God not to leave us alone, but to complete your salvific mission.

Pope John Paul II spoke about this, about the salvific nature of the Ascension into- in some of his audiences back in 1989. He said that the Ascension is the final stage of his earthly itinerary and it is therefore intimately related to the first coming, that is his descent, which took place in his Incarnation. The incarnation is spoken of as a descent. And that- that means if it's a descent, he existed, like up there, right, before. And- and that's why St. John says, "No one has ever gone into Heaven except the one who came down from Heaven, the Son of Man." And so we understand that the Ascension has a salvific purpose. For you to leave like that, you have a salvific purpose, you have our good in mind. "Truly, I tell you, it is for your good that I'm going away," he said. "Unless I go away," he said, "the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you."

So, all we have now, Lord, are your footprints on the ground: your example, your teaching, and the very knowledge that you stood in this very place. We- well, we can look up at the clouds because we think we see that you are- we will- we will see you there more even than in those footprints. So that means that the cloud is more an indication of- of his presence than- than his absence. We have- we had, you know, we have clouds when we have rainy days and we are emotionally, physically, apostolically, you know, tired sometimes or too busy, we're stressed. But let us remember that the clouds make him even more present.

So, what does that mean for us in a more concrete way? Well, it means we have to have more supernatural vision, and this is the result of a vision of faith- faith in our life. And the Apostles were really conscious of this presence because, after the Ascension, the Gospel does tell us that they came back to Jerusalem actually rejoicing, and they were rejoicing. I mean, if you drop somebody off at the airport for a long distance journey, or a definitive journey, well, you'd be driving home kind of sad because you wouldn't see that person anymore. You'd still be trying to wrap your mind around, you know, not being with that loved one. But for the Apostles, the one word that was ringing in their ears was what he said to them. He said, "Go into the whole world to proclaim the gospel to every creature- creature." They had a deep sense of mission. I think that's a lot of what their joy was about, a deep sense. They had what they had to do next. They were not going to spend the time

moping around the- we- you and I to have to be filled with zeal or- or feel the urgency of that call that churches mandate. That's why we're here to connect souls with the Lord. Who will intercede for them?

St. Josemaria uses often that expression, *apostolic zeal*. And he said that, in fact, the Ascension actually really fired up the Apostles. He says this in *Christ is Passing By*. He says, "With the amazing naturalness of the things of God, the contemplative soul is filled with apostolic zeal. My heart has warmed within me a fire blazed forth from my thoughts. What could this fire be if not the fire that Christ talks about? I" quote, "I have cast- I've come to cast fire upon the Earth. And what will I but- that it'd be kindled? What would I that it be kindled? An Apostolic fire that acquires its strength in prayer. There's no other better way than this to carry on throughout the whole world, the battle of peace to which every Christian is called to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ." And, well this is really the whole plan behind the Ascension, to fire up the Apostles to spread the Good News and that's what they did, to spread the light of Christ throughout the world.

I heard a- an anecdote recounted some years ago, I think it was like the year 2000, was recounted in St. Peter's Square, by a cardinal in a homily there. Well, it's like- it's a mythical story of sorts, but it talks about the Ascension of Jesus. And the story is that Jesus, okay, so he's like, ascending into Heaven and as he's going up to God the Father, suddenly he runs into St. Gabriel the Archangel, right, who's up there somehow, right. And see, Gabriel says, oh, Lord, like, hey, what are you doing here? Like, what's- what's up? And Jesus says, Well, I guess you didn't get the memo, but I'm on my way to Heaven to be with God the Father, to be seated at the right hand of God the Father, that's my plan. Oh, okay. I got it, I got it. And Gabriel looks down on the Earth, right. And he looks way down. It's all dark except one single place. He sees what presumably is Jerusalem, and there he sees this light. These little stars, kind of like flickers of light, and they seem to be- it seems to be spreading. And Gabriel says to Jesus, well, hey, what Lord, what are those- those lights down there? He says, Gabriel, those are my Apostles. And you notice the little lights there, they're going to spread in the- so the plan is that they are now right now doing apostolate, and they're spreading the love of God throughout the whole world. And so, soon all this darkness will be covered by these lights. And Gabriel looks down, kind of half doubting, you know, knowing the Apostles himself, and he's kind of looking down. And he says, well, Lord, that's your plan? Yeah, that's the plan. And he says, Well, what if that plan doesn't work? And the Lord looks at him very seriously and says, Gabriel, I have no other plan, that's the plan.

I have no other plan. That is the plan of Jesus Christ, that we be real Apostles and bring light into the world. There's no other magical formula that is going to bring the love of God. We have to be his collaborators, not our light but the light of Christ which can light up all the darkness, the sorrow, the meaninglessness, of existence. And indeed, despite human frailty, weakness, and even abuses, we

know, Lord, that you are there working, you're working in the sacraments, you're giving your grace to us. Let's make lots of acts of faith and help to boost this faith in others. Let us truly be optimistic like those lights that are spreading there, they're going further into the darkness to spread the light of Christ. Let us be optimistic, let us be upbeat. And ask yourself, how is he truly present in my life? How am I kind of serving as a good contagion, bringing his love to others by this immortal flame so that he'll never be forgotten. And Lord, we knew you had to leave in order to bring the Holy Spirit and his intimacy to sanctify us. Let us now really live this time of the Ascension with more acts of faith and a real joy that the Lord wants us to be his collaborators in the evangelization of the whole world.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help to put them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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