

THE FESTIVAL OF THE ASCENSION

What Goes Up Must Come (Back) Down

17 May 2009

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With Hampton Roads being the largest Navy base in the world, ships come and go on a regular basis. Last week the cruiser Leyte Gulf returned from a 6 month deployment, always a joyful experience for the sailors and their families. On the other side of the coin, this Wednesday some 4000 sailors and Marines of the Bataan (LHA 5) amphibious ready group will be heading out.....for six long months. Each time this happens, and many of you here know this from first-hand experience, crowds of family members, friends and well-wishers gather at the dock to say good bye. Many of them linger to watch the ships move out of sight before they head home, often with tears in their eyes. But as far as I know, nobody sits on the dock for the entire six months. In fact, it's probably only a few minutes and they start clearing the pier for "business as usual." As tough as it might be for moms, dads, kids, parents and spouses, life has to go on.

That's very much like what happened 40 days after Easter. Jesus had appeared to hundreds of people, offering, as Luke says, "many convincing proofs" that He was very much alive. He met believers from Jerusalem up to the Sea of Galilee and then back again to Jerusalem. Finally, on day 40 He led His little band of 11 disciples on a "Sabbath's Day Walk" out of Jerusalem and up to the Mount of Olives, gave them His final instructions, blessed them, and ascended up into the sky until, as Luke records, "*a cloud hid Him from their sight.*"

Imagine that. The most important and influential person in the entire history of the world and ELEVEN people are there to witness His ascension into heaven. You can almost hear them, like a bunch of school-kids watching a balloon release: "*I can still see Him!! Where did He go? He's by that cloud! I can see Him better than YOU can! I can't. He's gone!!*"

What's going through their minds? What's gnawing at the pit of their stomachs. It's been only 43 days since Good Friday and they've spent half of that time hiding from the Jewish leaders. Fear is still a reality for them. The roller-coaster-ride of their emotions has endured Jesus' burial, Easter, His appearances, and now....now Jesus leaves, not through a locked door but up.....into the sky.

And then He was gone.....but they were NOT alone. Two angels appeared while their

eyes were still fixed on the sky, angels with a *question* and a *promise*.

The question was simple: *“Why are you still standing here looking into the sky?”* It was their way of reminding the eleven disciples that Jesus had given them work to do while He was gone, work that we call *“The Great Commission.”* They were to go to Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, making disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and by teaching everyONE everyTHING Jesus had taught them. *“Don’t just STAND HERE LOOKING UP,”* said the angels!

Then the angels offered this promise: ***“This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back the same way you have seen Him go.”***

With that, the angels were gone and the disciples headed back to Jerusalem.

Does it strike you as a tad strange that although this was the FIRST time an angel had appeared to ANY of these eleven disciples, Luke doesn’t record that they were even amazed? Instead, what Luke DOES record for us is the one question that the disciples asked the last time they met Jesus before the ascension: *“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?”*

Even after three years some of them still didn’t “get it.” They still thought Jesus had come to put Jerusalem back on the map, the way it had been when David and Solomon were kings. They still thought, as some still do today, that Jesus was about earthly prosperity and financial success. The Hosannas of Palm Sunday were still ringing in their ears as they envisioned the crowns they would wear and imagined the glory they would have when Jesus became the King of Jerusalem.....when all along Jesus had asked them to carry their own crosses and to be His *“martyrs,”* His witnesses.

Now, with the sky filled only with clouds and the angels gone back to the Homecoming Celebration of Jesus in heaven.....can you begin to imagine THAT..... the disciples were on their own, heading back to the upper room and joining the other believers in what Luke records (Acts 1:14) as ‘constant prayer.’

In John 14 Jesus offers comfort to His disciples before His crucifixion with these words: ***“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms (mansions); if it were not so I would have told you. I am going there***

to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me.

ALL of us, the sinful people that we are, have troubled hearts. I certainly do and I'm sure you do as well. To paraphrase Paul I would condense a lot of my life in these few words, *"The good I want to do I cannot do and the things I don't want to do, I do them all the time!"* In fact, Luther reminds us that IF our hearts are NOT troubled, we better take our own pulse and be sure that we're still alive, because the human condition ensures that we will struggle in this life. We are captive to sin, death and the power of the devil, a captivity from which only Jesus can redeem us, taking our sins to the cross and suffering the fires of hell to pay the price for our freedom.

In the faith gifted to us through baptism God has washed us clean of our sins and wrapped us in the robes of Christ's righteousness, assuring us of that "place" that Christ has gone to prepare, a place that must be absolutely INCREDIBLE, for the simple fact that God Himself lives there and in time, welcomes each of us home.

The Concordia Bronxville Chorus truly blessed us last evening and again this morning, and we praise God that you do what you do and are willing to share your many gifts with us, but I have a question. When you arrived here at Hope yesterday, how many people were here to welcome you? About as many as the number of disciples who gathered to see Jesus ascend? In other words, this is a mere "stop on the journey," not a true homecoming.

Picture this instead: the beloved disciple John writing about the *revelation* God had given him in a picture of what WE WILL SEE and we WILL experience at the time God welcomes US home: *Before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and holding palm branches and they cried out in a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb."* (Rev 7:9-10)

That, my friends, will be our homecoming.....and I can hardly wait.

SO..... what's TAKING HIM SO LONG? Is the place not prepared?

"Preparing the Mansions" is not the issue. God who created this entire universe in six short days doesn't need 2000 years to prepare even a "mansion" in heaven for us. That work is done. The banquet table is set. The entire heaven is ready. It's simply this: the saving

news of Jesus Christ must be proclaimed to the entire world. Once that is done, and only God will know when....don't let anyone try to tell you otherwise, then the promise of the angels to the disciples will be fulfilled and Jesus will come back.....in the same way they saw Him go.

In other words, *what went up...must come back down*. But this time things will be different. Jesus' physical return to earth won't be witnessed by only 11 men on a hill top. Instead, Revelation 1 describes the scene this way:

*Look, He is coming with the clouds,
And every eye will see him.
Even those who pierced him;
And all the peoples of the earth will mourn over him.
So shall it be. Amen and amen.*

When Jesus comes back, the laws of physics notwithstanding, EVERY single human being on the face of the earth will see His visible return. Every person alive will know that Christ has returned, the triumphant victor coming back to take His bride, His church "home."

What goes up.....must come back. He gave His WORD on that. In the meantime, we have work to do because we ARE HIS WITNESSES to the ends of the earth. We have been tasked with Making Disciples of ALL Nations and we have been filled with the Holy Spirit, each of us given specific gifts necessary to accomplish that task, things we will discuss in the weeks ahead.

And.... last but certainly not least....Jesus, who ascended into heaven in His earthly body is now able to be with each and every one of us in two very real and present ways: first, in Holy Communion, where He becomes literally flesh and blood within our own flesh and blood; and second, as a guide and guard to each of us all of the time.....walking with us on our journey of life.

Jesus' ascension guarantees OUR ascension. His homecoming assures OUR homecoming. And His Spirit keeps us until that time comes!

And to that, the people of God (and of Hope) say AMEN.