

Easter VII, 2023

St. Barnabas

Forty days after Easter the Church celebrates the Feast of the Ascension, the symbol of Christ's departure from the earth. Last Thursday marked that forty days. We used to extinguish the pascal candle after the reading of the Gospel on the Feast of the Ascension. We did so to indicate that Christ's human nature was taken into heaven where He now exercises all the power in heaven and on earth. But it also signified that we were without leadership, in an arrested state between the departure of Jesus from the earth and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In other words, traditionally the Holy Spirit does not descend until 50 days after Easter, and we are not yet there.

After Vatican II, the Church reconsidered extinguishing the pascal candle, realizing that we are not without God during the ten-day period between Ascension and Pentecost and that the season of Easter extends fully throughout the Great Fifty Days. Still, there is something in the human psyche that senses a void with the departure of the visible Lord, a certain loss of direction without our tangible leader. How are we to keep our bearings in the meantime? How do our fallible minds hold on to His teachings? How do we keep His words from slipping through our fingers? Is there something or someone material for us to embrace?

On this Sunday between Jesus' Ascension and Pentecost, we wait, holding tight to what He told us. We wait, seeking to bring together the horizontal and vertical dimensions of our lives. We wait with some urgency for the completion of His promise, trying to remind ourselves of what He told us. Shall we keep a diary in this meantime? Or is there a mediator to whom we can turn?

Years ago I walked into the library of Union Theological Seminary, New York City, and saw a post-it note pinned to the bulletin board. It read, "Gone to Father's house to prepare your place. Be back soon to pick you up." I think of that note every time I read the designated prayers for this Sunday: The preface of the eucharistic prayer we will shortly declare says, "After his glorious resurrection he openly appeared to his disciples, and in their sight ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us." But in the collect we just prayed, we entreated Him, "Do not leave us comfortless"; and we are left with a momentary sense of absence.

Though Jesus had told us, "I will not leave you orphaned," today's gospel prayer makes clear, "I am no longer in the world." The Johannine scholar of Union Seminary, Raymond E. Brown, suggested that in this discourse Jesus transcends time and space, that he has crossed the threshold from time to eternity and is already on the way to the Father or, at least, halfway between this world and the Father's presence at the time He spoke these words.¹

But both the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel according to Luke told us that as the disciples watched, Jesus was lifted up from the earth and was taken from their sight. Numerous artists across the ages have attempted to depict this extraordinary event: Giotto, Perugino, Mantegna, Raphael. Perhaps my least favorite painting² shows the disciples looking up at toes leaving the edge of the canvas.

Acts recounts that in addition to the eleven disciples named at the moment of ascension, Jesus' brothers and his mother Mary were there. Scholars note that the inclusion of Mary is not accidental, that in fact this is Luke's first mention of her by name since the infancy narrative. And Mary figures prominently in the life of Christians from that day forward to today, as can be seen in multiple works of art.

In the Laurentian Library in Florence, Italy, are the collected manuscripts of the Medici family. This beautiful library, designed by Michelangelo, houses the Rabbula Gospels, an important illuminated manuscript dating from the year 586, which includes in folio 13v a detailed depiction of Jesus' ascension. Mary the god-bearer, the earthly mother figure, stands in the center of this 13 ½ by 10 ½ inch treasure. Clothed in her

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, (xiii-xxi)*, (Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York), p. 747

² By Martin Schongauer.

customary blue mantel, Mary the mother is recognized as a vehicle for remembering the words of Jesus. Though Julian of Norwich, the mystic theologian of the Middle Ages who wrote *Revelations of Divine Love*, referred to Jesus as Christ our Mother, it is Mary who most easily focusses our images of motherly love. She remains a witness, a mediator of the words of Jesus for countless Christians. Could it be that the witness of those around us is the interaction that is required before the Holy Spirit comes? What does a loving mother tell us as we wait in emptiness for God's Holy Spirit? What might the prototypical mother tell us if she could, we who are children of God?

At a recent memorial service the thoughts of a modern-day mediator, a loving mother whose life was the subject of that memorial service, were shared. And those thoughts directly address the meantime. I quote: "Now that you are grown and on your own, I look back and ask myself...Did I tell you? Did I tell you all that I meant to tell you, all that I felt was important? Did I tell you or was it lost in the shuffle of our everyday lives? The busy full days, when I taught and didn't know it. What did I teach—Was it strong? Was it good? Did it root in you something real, that will allow you to grow with a firm and sound foundation? Did I tell you....

Did I tell you to love, not with a fair weather love, but with a love that accepts and cherishes unconditionally? Love not with a quick and passing love, but with a love that is a quiet peace within your heart.

Did I tell you to be thoughtful? Not to be a martyr or doormat to be trod upon, but to be aware of other people and their needs. To meet others with awareness, and within your own frame work, be able to meet them halfway and on occasion go the other half--joyfully.

Did I tell you to be courteous? Not to display empty manners with no meaning, but to live the courtesy born of caring, and to express the caring through the small formalities and customs passed down through the years.

Did I tell you to be bold? Not to be afraid of the unknown, but to live life to the fullest and meet each new experience with joy and anticipation.

Did I tell you to be cautious? To temper your daring and sense of adventure with good judgement and consideration.

Did I tell you to serve other people - if only in a small way? There is growth and satisfaction in being part of something larger than yourself, and your life will be richer for doing this.

Did I tell you to maintain a sense of the past? To recall and uphold all that is best and meaningful in our country and in our society. But never be afraid to speak out where you don't believe something is right, or where there is room for improvement. Work for what you believe, but work in a positive way, within a structure of order and reason.

Did I tell you to laugh, to dance, to sing? While there is a lot in life that is hard, take it as it comes. Find the good, and make time to be joyful.

Did I tell you to be creative, to explore the seed within you? The joy of exploring a third dimension - a world of your own, discovering and fulfilling your own capabilities. Find your creative spirit and let it grow. In that seed is something spiritual, and there you will find God, whatever you conceive him to be. God sent you here to have a good life, making the world better, and in your fulfillment is his hope for the world.

Did I tell you the joy and challenge of being a child of God? Did I tell you that in the challenge of being a human is the challenge of balancing your world? The need to achieve and the need to nurture, the need to be strong and the need to be tender, the need to meet the test that life brings— to always keep love at the center. The joy of making a home, the center but not the limit, for the lives of those you love.

For you are loved, loved. Not only by your friends and family, but by a God that gave you breath and brought you life. By a God that gave himself for you that you should be with him at the end and in the safety and sureness of his endless love. You are worthy of love, and you are loved. Let love be the star by which you set your sail.

Did I tell you these things as we went along the way? If I did, I am humbly grateful for having the opportunity to share in your life. If there are things I should have said and did not, then you must choose for yourself. If something has meaning, accept it and make it your own.” End quote.

For this mean time Jesus told us and tells us still through others that we are not alone. We limit the power of God if we think of Jesus’ words as only mediated through recorded history, for there were and are other recipients and sharers of God’s love than those whose writings have dominated tradition. There are voids in that history, voices that were denigrated by those in power, viewpoints that were shunned. But we have not been in limbo for centuries. No, we have been adopted as God’s children by our family, the Church. We have been surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

So take your share of the love of God as promised to you. Hold to it in those moments when love seems absent. Then spread that love to all those you encounter. Tell that love and find it rebound to you. For God’s sake tell others, “I love you.” And the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God from this time forth and forever more.

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