

SERMON FOR THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD, THURSDAY, 25.V.2006, 7:30 P.M.
EV. LUTH. CHURCH OF SAINT JAMES THE APOSTLE / BROQUE, PENNA.
ACTS 1:1-11; PSALM 47; EPHESIANS 1:5-23; LUKE 24:44-53
HOLY COMMUNION – SETTING 2



Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

WHILE HE WAS BLESSING THEM, HE WITHDREW FROM
THEM AND WAS CARRIED UP INTO HEAVEN.

-- LUKE 24:51

In addition to Luke's narrative of the Ascension, there is
but one other account. That is found in Mark 16:19, where the
earliest of the four Evangelists writes in that straightforward and
unadorned way that is characteristic of his whole Gospel: **SO
THEN THE LORD JESUS, AFTER HE HAD SPOKEN TO THEM,
WAS TAKEN UP INTO HEAVEN AND SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT
HAND OF GOD.** We can hear in Mark's account, probably
written at Rome, the words of the Apostles' Creed, definitely
written at Rome and at about the same time as the Gospel: **AND
SITS AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE FATHER.** Luke tells
something else: **WHILE HE WAS BLESSING THEM, HE WITHDREW**

FROM THEM . . . or, in the old RSV translation, a little less sensitive to Greek syntax, but more direct, **WHILE HE BLESSED THEM, HE PARTED FROM THEM**

Why does Luke put it just that way? I doubt that we will ever know the answer to that question in this life. Early Christian tradition would answer that the Blessed Mother of Our Lord *told* Luke, her personal physician, to write it that way, along with the rest of the Gospel and most of Acts. But, whether the narrative voice we hear in today's Gospel is Luke's or Mary's, the idea and the feeling this wording creates in our minds and hearts fits with a theme running right through the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. I believe it is also a theme running right through the history of the Church and the story of your life and mine as living members of the Church, the Body of Christ.

WHILE HE BLESSED THEM, HE PARTED FROM THEM, AND WAS CARRIED UP INTO HEAVEN. That theme is this: The Holy Spirit, the main character of both Luke and Acts and certainly

the Prime Mover behind all significant events in the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is constantly, *constantly* at work creating faith through Jesus words and deeds. The Holy Spirit creates faith in Mary's heart that enables her will to cooperate in the miraculous conception and birth of her Child, being told, almost from the beginning, by wise old Simeon, that she would lose her Child to the events His tiny life would someday set in motion (Luke 2:34,35). Isaiah's prophecy of the Holy Spirit's work and power form the first words to come out of Jesus' mouth at the beginning of His ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth. Some unseen power, working through the powerful love of a mother for her Son, enables Mary to remain at the foot of the Cross when all but John and Mary Magdalene have fled, there to receive the poor body of her Son in the hour of His all-too-real death. The Holy Spirit is at work through the words and appearances of the Risen Christ, working courage and faith and joy in those who can barely believe their eyes and ears. The

promised Holy Spirit will gather them all together on Pentecost, Mary included, in a room that had been their refuge from the world, sending them forth in courage from that place into all the world, sending them to those who had *not* seen Jesus, either before or after His death and rising from the dead, to those whom He told Thomas would be blessed precisely because they believed in the blessing of God's love in a Christ they had never seen. **WHILE HE BLESSED THEM, HE PARTED FROM THEM, AND WAS CARRIED UP INTO HEAVEN.**

He blesses His Church, and He blesses us, *as he parts from us*. He opens our minds to understand the Scriptures, as Luke tells us here, and earlier, in the story of the encounter between the Risen Christ and the Disciples on the road to Emmaus. He opens our minds to understand what God is saying to us on every page of the Bible, declaring God's love for us and God's purpose for us, and then He departs, in that same instant, still present, though unseen, in those minds once closed in despair, now opened in faith. In the act of blessing the Disciples on that

first Ascension Thursday, He parts from them, and that is part of His blessing, pointing our minds and hearts to a realm we do not yet inhabit, to a level of existence we know only by hope, but that hope is as firm and as eternal as the One who created our hearts and minds to cling to it.

From place to place and time to time, Christians and even the Church in general have blushed at this hope, have been embarrassed to be 'looking up' as it were, like those first Disciples of the Ascension Luke mentions in Acts 1:11, feeling a little foolish when those mysterious men in white suddenly appear, as they had at the empty tomb, to gently chide them and to comfort them. But, it is not angels who embarrass us when we catch ourselves hoping, and even praying, for the world to come. We are prone to feel foolish before this poor world, and even sometimes before the Church in her visible form, for wishing so much to follow the One Whose blessing sends us into

this world, through this world, but ultimately *up*, beyond if you prefer, in a soaring, transcendent hope.

The accusation of being ‘other-worldly’ may not sting quite as much as it did in the days of the Cold War, when many of us exerted ourselves in the pulpit and from the academic lectern to stress that Karl Marx had nothing on Jesus Christ and Francis of Assisi, etc., *and the Church today*, for that matter, when it comes to concern for the suffering masses, but being thought of spoken of as ‘other worldly’ would not be a compliment either. Even today, not one of our graduated seminarians or pastors in what is called ‘the call process’ would *dare* to list ‘desire for the life to come’ or ‘passion for that which is eternal’ at the top of their list of imagined strengths, not unless professional death as a prelude to light and life eternal is the candidate’s object.

Still, there are frank voices, here and there, who speak out in a language that makes sense on Ascension Thursday. The

English composer, John Taverner, Anglican in origin and education, imbued with the intense spirituality and sublime æsthetic sense of the Anglican choral and instrumental Church music, decided ultimately to cross over into Eastern Orthodox Christianity because it is so clearly and completely concerned with the hope and the vision of Ascension, because it so clearly and firmly puts every other concern in its proper, subordinate place. “I hate change,” Taverner wrote in notes to a work he composed on the tragic death of a young woman named Athené, “and I refuse to pretend to believe in it. What matters is not this world but the next. Music as a whole, like the Church’s liturgy, is there to make contact with that world, which is our hope.” I certainly could not have said it better myself, and I doubt that I would have had the nerve. Thank God, then, for John Taverner, for the Church where she knows to Whom she belongs and where her destiny lies, for the Liturgy and for music

in general as that priceless gift of God lifts our hearts and minds up out of the rut of unbelief.

The eternal Christian hope is not fatalism. It is anything but a silent, defeated resignation. Our hope in eternity is *now*. It teaches us compassion, mercy and love for the neighbor and for the world, and teaches us not to expect too much of either. Our eternal hope is *strength*, the strength of a mighty army marching toward battle with a consecrated purpose. I hear this strength in the music and lyrics of a song by Julie Miller which she composed in the old Southern mountain tradition, one I am practicing and practicing so that we may hear it once in worship this summer. Here are those words:

*When I go don't cry for me,
In my Father's arms I'll be.
The wounds this world's left on my soul,
will all be healed and I'll be whole.
Sun and moon will be replaced,
with the light of Jesus' face.
And I will not be ashamed
for my Savior knows my name.*

*Refrain: It don't matter where you bury me,
I'll be home and I'll be free.
It don't matter where I lay,
All my tears'll be washed away.*

*Gold and silver blind the eye,
temporary riches lie.
So come and eat from heaven's store,
come and drink and thirst no more.
It's all enough for me my friend,
when my time below must end.
For my life belongs to Him,
Who will raise the dead again.*

Refrain: *It don't matter where you bury me,
I'll be home and I'll be free.
It don't matter where I lay,
all my tears'll be washed away.*

*When death comes to call on you,
then will He know your name too?*

WHILE HE BLESSED THEM, HE PARTED FROM THEM . . .

Indeed, how else would we have known to follow Him not only back into the world, but also and ultimately above and beyond it? How else would we know His blessing, His love, in and through the countless partings of this life except for these precious words of Luke, who applies them like healing ointment to the wounds of our hearts? We thank and praise You, Lord God, Holy Spirit, that You have preserved them in Your Holy Church for our hearing, and that You have opened our minds to them. Prepare a place for us, Lord Jesus! ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

