

The Ascension of the Lord
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Reflection

I'm a military chaplain with the reserves, so work part-time with the 33 Service Battalion. My unit has drivers and cooks, supply techs and mechanics, but we're all soldiers. Right now a group of them are training for a hike in Holland. Four forty-km days in a four-leaf clover around the city of Nijmegen. But to get there, first they have to walk 800 kms around Ottawa: more and more each week for three months. Right now, they're walking 20 km on Tuesday night, another 20 on Friday, and 30 on Saturday. Each step pushes pain from the soles of their feet up to their shoulder blades. Injuries develop and some people drop out, but the others carry on. Retired soldiers support them, greeting them at the end with oranges, bananas and water. It gives them hope; something to look forward to, even when all they can see is the back of the soldier in front of them.

Did you ever wonder what gave the apostles hope? Their journeys were even tougher. It was the Ascension of the Lord that gave them hope, which we mark today; hope that they shared with the Church. The resurrection was forty days earlier. It ended their sadness at the sight of Jesus suffering on the cross, filling them with Easter joy. His appearances brought reconciliation and confidence; but it was mingled with distraction and doubt. The resurrection was not enough.

Acts 1:1-11
Ps 47
Eph 1:17-23
Mk 16:15-20

Without Jesus walking before them, they had scattered to their previous occupations. Do you remember when they saw Jesus standing on the shore? They were trying to fish, even though Jesus wanted them to be fishers of men. The disciples knew about his glory but it was veiled, so they returned to their old lives.

Mark's account of the Ascension begins with an instruction. "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." A formidable task. But then he gives promises; "signs that will accompany those who believe: they will cast out demons, speak in new tongues, and won't be harmed if they pick up snakes or drink any deadly thing; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." Their ministry will heal body and soul as they speak words given by the Holy Spirit. His loving power will shield them according to God's plan, until martyrdom unites them to the cross. Before then, they would be witnesses, confessing the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Instructions, promises and then a vision. It crossed the threshold between heaven and earth, it tore the veil between shadow and light. "As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." According to Mark, Jesus "was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God." They couldn't tear their eyes away. "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven?"

St. Leo the Great has an answer: "the Son of Man was revealed as Son of God in a more perfect and transcendent way once he had entered into his Father's glory (LoH, II, 937)." After the resurrection, the glorified body of Jesus could walk through walls; but he was sometimes hard to recognize. Just as the disciples couldn't always tell his face, they couldn't see his divinity. This changed at the Ascension. They caught a glimpse of heaven, where Jesus would prepare them a place (Jn 14:2) - his humanity to be joined by theirs - to be joined by ours, and were filled with hope. The experience was unique, mirrored only by Paul before Damascus (659). It surpassed the visions granted to the saints in Avila and Vilnius, Fatima and Lourdes. The image of divine mercy leads the faithful to say, "Jesus, I trust in you." This trust is participation in the grace of the Ascension. Paul prays for the Ephesians that they might share the mystical experience of the apostles; that they might participate in the grace of the Ascension: "with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power."

We too can participate in the grace of the Ascension. Its effects are present in the Eucharist. We see not just bread and wine, but Jesus, reaching down from heaven. We don't see him with our bodily eyes, but with the eyes of faith, which are even better.

In the words of Leo the Great: "Our faith is nobler and stronger because sight has been replaced by a doctrine whose authority is accepted by believing hearts, enlightened from on high." For this Eucharist, we give thanks for the hope given to the apostles, the hope given to us, the hope given to those who hear our witness.