

Homily based on the readings from May 9, 2024 (Acts 1.1-11;  
Ephesians 1.17-23; Mark 16.15-20)

“Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?” These words come from the end of today’s first reading, when two angels appeared to the Apostles immediately after Christ’s Ascension into Heaven. From a certain perspective, there is almost a humorous element to this admonition. The Apostles had just witnessed the greatest mystery that any human being – except possibly the Blessed Mother and Saint Joseph – had ever beheld in the history of the *world*. Any person on the *planet* would have been utterly dumbfounded – unable to speak, unable to move, unable even to think. At that specific moment, a pair of angels show up and basically tell them all just to “snap out of it.”

The angels, of course – who were presumably acting on behalf of Christ himself – knew exactly what they were doing. There was doubtless a temptation for the Apostles to view the Ascension as the end of the story – as the culmination of Christ’s involvement in human history. This

moment does represent a conclusion, in a certain sense, but fundamentally it marks a new *beginning*. The mission of the Church, which would be confirmed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit ten days later at Pentecost, was just getting started.

When one thinks about inspirational leaders throughout history – people like George Washington or Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King – their impact largely depends their ability to move people with their words and their actions. Once they are no longer *present*, in a visible or an audible sense, their influence is substantially diminished. It may seem paradoxical, but exactly the opposite phenomenon occurred in the case of Jesus Christ. Although Jesus had many eager followers throughout his earthly ministry, almost all of them ran away in horror as he approached his Crucifixion. It was not until Christ became physically *absent* that his influence was truly felt. The Apostles, who had previously scattered in terror, suddenly became willing to die a martyr's death. Pope Saint Leo I, who himself is remembered as a courageous and charismatic leader, made the following observation:

Even the blessed apostles, though they had been strengthened by so many miracles and instructed by so much teaching, took fright at the cruel suffering of the Lord's passion and could not accept his resurrection without hesitation. Yet they made such progress through his ascension that they now found joy in what had terrified them before. They were able to fix their minds on Christ's divinity as he sat at the right hand of his Father, since what was presented to their bodily eyes no longer hindered them from ... the realization that he had not left his Father when he came down to earth, nor had he abandoned his disciples when he ascended into heaven. The truth is that 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; he now began to be indescribably more *present* in his divinity to those from whom he was further removed in his humanity.

In other words, while Christ came to *earth* to reveal himself to mankind, he had to return to *Heaven* for us to recognize him fully.

Because of the way the New Testament is organized, one might presume that the four Gospels were the first books to be written. That assumption, in fact, turns out to be incorrect. Many of the epistles, including most of the letters of Saint Paul, are almost certainly older. In other words, when first proclaiming Christ to the wider world, the Church did not generally emphasize his earthly actions – the miracles he performed, the parables he told – but focused instead on his place in the Heavenly Kingdom. They wanted people to understand first and foremost who Jesus *is*, not just what he *did*. As we heard today, Saint Paul declared that Christ is seated:

at [God's] right hand in the heavens,  
far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion,  
and every name that is named  
not only in this age but also in the one to come.

That is the perspective of someone whose understanding of Christ was fundamentally shaped by his knowledge of the Ascension.

As you probably noticed, we heard two accounts of the Ascension in today's readings: a fairly detailed description in the Acts of the Apostles and a much briefer version in the Gospel of Mark. Even though Mark's narrative is much shorter, it does contain one essential piece of information that is missing from Acts: after Jesus "took his seat at the right hand of God," it says that the Apostles "went forth and preached *everywhere*." They did not, in fact, *stand there looking at the sky*, but carried the Good News of Jesus Christ to every corner of the known world.

The Ascension endowed the Apostles with both a *gift* and an *obligation*. The *gift* was that, for the first time in history, human beings were granted a clear understanding of the divine nature of Jesus Christ. The *obligation* was to spread that understanding to all peoples and nations around the world. Nearly two thousand years later, we are still benefiting from that gift and are still bound by that obligation. Only when Christ comes again in his glory, *robed in dreadful majesty*, will we

have permission to stop spreading the Gospel and to gaze expectantly at the sky.