

“As they were looking on, [Jesus] was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.’”

Today’s readings give us two different accounts of Jesus’ Ascension, the first being the one from Luke’s Acts of the Apostles which I just quoted. I have always loved this particular account because it is so human. I have no problem imagining the disciples standing there, staring into the sky with awe and confusion as Jesus ascended out of their sight because that is exactly what I would have been doing as well. This would be a natural human response to the inexplicable which makes the angel’s words come across as a confusing rebuke. “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.”

Upon further reflection, this seemingly odd statement contains deep truths. In a certain way, we could say that this message contains a summary of the entire Christian message and mission. This message, of course, begins with Jesus’ ascension into heaven. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He was not abandoning us but leading us, going before us to prepare the way for where we would one day follow. As Jesus said elsewhere in the Gospel of John, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you might also be.” As we hear even more clearly in today’s prayers, “where the Head has gone before us in glory, the Body is called to follow in hope.”

And yet, it is equally clear from what we have just heard that Jesus will also one day descend back to earth. As the angel said, “[He] will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.” The Book of Revelations and many other places in Scripture speak clearly of a coming judgement, a particular moment in time when God will come to earth to judge the living and the dead. Those who have lived lives of faith according to God’s commandments will be led by Christ to our true home in heaven while those who choose to deny Christ will be cast outside the gates. So, He will one day descend again to judge us and to lead those who are worthy to His Father in heaven.

In between these two events, Christ’s ascension and His second coming, we must live out our personal mission, our calling to live lives of faith in accordance with God’s commands so that we might be prepared for heaven. As the angel said, “Why are you standing there looking at the sky?” In other words, this is no time to stand around because there is work to be done. The second account of the Ascension which we heard today from Matthew is a little more explicit about this need to begin laboring in the fields of the Lord. Jesus told those present, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

Each and every single one of us is being sent out on mission, and yet, at the same time, Jesus wants to make it clear that we are not being sent out alone. Even though Jesus has ascended to His Father, He will not leave us alone and will be with us always, even until the end of the age. In fact, Jesus tells us elsewhere in Scripture that He had to leave so that He can be present to us in the way we truly need. This seems to imply that Jesus continued physical presence on the earth was impeding Him in some way. By ascending to heaven, He made it possible to be present to

every single human being everywhere and at all times by means of His Holy Spirit which He sent upon us and through the sacraments.

This highlights the fact that Jesus does not expect us to be able to accomplish our mission on our own because this would actually be impossible. None of us, no matter who we are and how good we might be, could ever fulfill the mission of our lives on our own without God's help. None of us, no matter who we are and how good we might be, could ever merit the reward of heaven on our own without God's help. It doesn't matter if our mission is to be a parent or a priest, a doctor or a nurse, a student or a teacher... No matter what our personal mission might be, we need God's help to bring our mission to fulfillment. And I think that this makes sense of the fact that one of the last commands Jesus gave to His disciples before He ascended into heaven was that they must wait in Jerusalem until the promised Holy Spirit came upon them.

For it is only through the power of the Spirit in our lives that we can recognize Christ's continued presence among us and be strengthened for the mission to which we have been called. It is only through this same Spirit working through us that we can be prepared for Christ's second coming at the end of our days. And so, we too must wait in anticipation for this Spirit to manifest itself in our own lives so that we too might go forth unto all of the nations, preaching and teaching the truths which have been made known to our hearts, living out the mission that has been entrusted to each and every single one of us. And so, just as the angels once challenged the disciples, they once more challenge us here. "People of faith, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven."