

Ascension of the Lord

May 20, 2007

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Luke 24:46-53

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“I Am with You Always”

Jesus spent 40 days preparing his apostles and disciples for the inevitable, his farewell. He had spent time with them, trying to help them understand about his death and resurrection and the meaning of what he had taught them those three years. He appeared to them, reassuring them, deepening their faith in themselves as his followers. But then it was time for him to leave. How his followers' hearts must have ached! They thought they had lost him at the crucifixion, were confused and then relieved and delighted by the resurrection, but now he is leaving them again! He has promised them his spirit, but they don't know what that means. How can they let him go?

If I had been there, I think I would have begged him to stay! Or perhaps not. Although they did not know what his Ascension meant, they believed in his love and the truth of his words to them. He had never let them down before! He had always come through! The human sadness of saying good-bye is tempered by the promise of a deeper, more permanent relationship in the Spirit. Jesus seemed to be telling them there is something more to his life and death than Resurrection, or even Ascension.

In his book *The Holy Longing*, Ronald Rolheiser presents an expanded explanation to the paschal mystery that bears noting in relation to this feast and the mystery it describes, not only about the life of Christ but also for us Christians. He names five stages of the paschal cycle:

1. Good Friday—the loss of life—real death.
2. Easter Sunday—the reception of new life.
3. The Forth Days—a time for adjustment to the new and for grieving the old.
4. Ascension—letting go of the old and letting it bless you, the refusal to cling.
5. Pentecost—the reception of new spirit for the new life that one is already living (given on Easter).

Those same stages applied to us are restated this way:

1. Name your deaths.
2. Claim your births.
3. Grieve what you have lost and adjust to the new reality.
4. Do not cling to the old, let it ascend and give you its blessing.
5. Accept the spirit of the life that you are in fact living.

I think Rolheiser has something here that rings true for me in my own life. I have often wondered why after some kind of a dying within me and something new coming to life I don't always feel happy about it. With age I have come to see the necessity of grieving the old and giving myself time to adjust to the new. It is tempting to cling to the familiar, be it a place, a job, a relationship or some ability I used to have. It is difficult to let it go, much less to find a blessing in so doing. Aging is a case in point. I can't do what I could when I was 20, 40, I'll stop there! I can ignore the aging process, I certainly grieve it, but do I let it bless me? Although my body has new aches

and pains, I also find that my heart has grown bigger with the passage of years and the accumulation of life experience. The wisdom that comes with age is irreplaceable and cannot be manufactured artificially! Only when I accept the reality of life as I am able to live it now, am I living in the Spirit that Christ is offering to me today. What paschal cycle is happening in your life?

Jesus encourages his disciples and gave them a mandate in his final words to them: “Behold I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” He had given them all they would need to be his witnesses in the world, but they needed to let go of him and wait for the Spirit who would strengthen them and enable them to live the new life he had given to them through his resurrection.

Wherever I am in the paschal cycle, it is consoling to know that new life and the spirit to live the life I have been given will be mine, if I am patient with the process! Rolheiser concludes his chapter on the “Spirituality of the Paschal Mystery” with a poem he wrote about Mary Magdalene, who depicts the grace of this process for us personally:

I never suspected
Resurrection
and to be so painful
to leave me weeping
With joy
to have met you, alive and smiling, outside an empty tomb
With regret
not because I've lost you
but because I've lost you in how I had you—
in understandable, touchable, kissable, clingable
flesh
Not as fully Lord, but as graspably human.

I want to cling, despite your protest
cling to your body
cling to your, and my, clingable humanity
cling to what we had, our past.

But I know that . . . if I cling
you cannot ascend and
I will be left clinging to your former self
. . . unable to receive your present spirit.

We cannot cling to what has been. It is in the letting go that it can bless us, open us to the Spirit that will enable us to truly live the life Christ has given us. May your personal “paschal cycling” bring you to this place!