

## FEAST OF THE ASCENSION

Acts 1:12-14 | 1 Peter 4:13-16 | John 17:1-11a  
(These verses follow the homily.)

*Gladden us with holy joy, Almighty God, and make us rejoice with devout thanksgiving for the ascension of Christ, your Son, our exaltation, and where the head has gone before in glory, the body is called to follow in hope. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever, amen.*

ONE of the things that strikes me as we conclude the mission, the ministry, of Jesus, is the intoxicating joy that was experienced by those who witnessed it all happening and those who had a unique gift. The 11 who were there with Jesus grew in age and wisdom as he taught, like we all do when we listen attentively to the details of an ancient mystery that we find in the Scriptures — a God who revealed himself to us, telling us about his relationship with us and what he's longing for from us. We all have heard that story, and so did the disciples, but

what I find fascinating is that Jesus was with them and told them who he was and promised them unbelievable things, especially that he would stay with them, be with them, guide them, enlighten them. When they were called to that last moment, when he was ascending into heaven, the Scriptures that we just listened to, the gospel, had the most fascinating statement. It said they saw him. They listened to his story. They experienced the resurrected body of Christ. There they were, staring at him and worshipping him, and then that very potent, powerful statement: "And

they doubted.” If we’re honest, the mystery that God promises to accomplish within us, his indwelling presence, his ability to be a source of wisdom and strength for us — I doubt it all the time. I don’t so much sit down and say, “I doubt it,” as much as I fall back into the trap of feeling that I am the one responsible for 99 percent of what I’m going to try to do, what I’m going to accomplish.

I don’t know what it is about us, but Adam and Eve displayed it so beautifully in the very beginning. When they were offered a choice between the tree of wisdom, mystery or the tree of simple, practical knowledge, good/evil, right/wrong, they said, “Oh, give us good and evil, right and wrong. That’s so much easier for us to handle, because then we can be in charge. Just tell us what’s right. Tell us what’s wrong. We’ll do it. That makes total sense to us.” It still makes sense to human nature, but the fascinating thing about the teaching of Jesus is his invitation for your human nature to be empowered, enriched, infused with divine nature. That’s who he was. That’s how he walked this earth. That’s what he kept saying over and over again. “You see me, you see the Father. Everything I do is because the Father is in me.” It’s so

hard for us to grasp. At least for me, it’s hard for me to grasp how you can be two things at the same time. How can I be engaged with a power so far beyond me that I could do anything, such as make a tree rip up and go and be planted under the ocean? How crazy is that? I can move a mountain. That’s what he says, and when I hear those words and when I think about those promises, he makes me think, “That’s wonderful and amazing.” But then I have to go to work and get done the very things that I need to do and get myself in better order and spend more time doing the practices that I think will make me more effective than what I’m doing. *But over and over again, especially during these last Sundays as we are now celebrating the end of the ministry of Jesus, he makes it so clear in these last Sundays about who he is and what he’s going to accomplish in you and me throughout all the other Sundays of the year. He’s describing himself in a way that is basically beyond our imagining.*

That first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, describes it very beautifully, because it says clearly that when Jesus came to begin the church, he knew the church had to have a strength and a power that would be effective. He needed certain men to follow it, as well

as women, and the women were much better at grasping it than the men, but unfortunately the men were the ones in charge. If you can say it's unfortunate, meaning they probably were a lot slower in grasping the fullness of the message, but I love the fact that one of the questions the disciples had before Jesus ascended into heaven was this: "Oh, wait. Are you going to return Israel to its former glory?" I love that question, because it reminds me that, when I think about God's power in me, I'm thinking, "Well, can you use that power through me to fix everything, get it all back to the way we think it should be, a perfect world, a perfect person, a perfect ministry, a perfect church, a perfect family?" Then his answer is, "Well, that's not the work. Your work is not to fix everything or to make it all right." Things will be more correct, more whole, more complete in the timing that God has.

I often think about evolution and how the human race has evolved, and we're evolving in our consciousness, and I always thought in the past that we were all basically fully conscious. "Wow, look at all the things we can make and do, like computers and rockets. We're there. We've reached the pinnacle." Maybe we're just one-tenth

of the way there. Maybe we're just babies, still struggling with all these incredible promises from a God who says, "I need you in the world for me, and I came to show you, as clearly as I can, how this thing works." He comes as an example of a divine, human creature. We do know that he was 100 percent divine and 100 percent human. It's very hard — in fact, sometimes the teaching that Jesus was God gets in our way of understanding fully that we are like him. It used to be true for me. I always thought he was God in human form. I felt that, because I could see all the things he could do that I can't do. Somehow the idea that I can do those same things was only an idea. It was something I was taught, something I knew, but I didn't believe. I still have a hard time believing it. God can use me to affect anything in the world that he wants. My ego gets excited about such power and thinks, "Oh, I'd love to do this, this, this, that, fix this for that person, change this for that person." And that's a little bit like saying, "Are we going to restore everything, the kingdom of Israel?" And Jesus' answer, again, is, "No, that's not your worry. You are called to be a believer in what you are about to witness, what you're watching. Something's happening

around you right now, in this moment, on this mountain, and listen to my words and watch what happens to me.” *He’s making the promise clearer and clearer. He says, “I’ve come into the world so that I can open you to a new world. I have come into the world so that I can invite you into a relationship with me. You didn’t get it when I was describing it to you, when I was alive, and so I needed to do something that makes it clear that death is not what we think it is. It’s not the end. It’s actually the beginning of a richer, fuller existence.”*

When Jesus dies on the cross and comes back as a human being able to do mysterious things, to eat and yet walk through walls, he speaks to a group of 500 people for 40 days. That would be pretty awesome, to have somebody you know and whom you watched die come back and talk to you. That would certainly shake up your limited understanding of the way the world works, and it did shake them up, but it didn’t convince them yet of what God wanted them to understand and know and live. So you see this constant struggle that they’re having to believe, to believe something so outlandish, but he says it so clearly. As he’s leaving them, he says, “If you can see me — and you can — you will see me rise in a few

moments. I’m going to go up in a cloud.” That doesn’t make any logical sense. How does that work? Then he said, “I’m going to come back to you in the same way.” Many people think that’s the description of the final times. He comes back, yes. That could well be what it points to, but I think it points to something more, because just a few days later, what happens is this image of wisdom, peace and love, a dove, comes descending, and it’s fire. It descends on these men and women, and they somehow in that moment, for the first time, cease to doubt. For the first time, they begin to understand the mystery that this Spirit who has come into them is Christ, is Jesus, is the image that he gave them of a divine human creature. We do not participate in divinity to the fullness of Jesus, but that would be the wrong way to focus on it, because it would diminish our belief and our need to see how powerful it is that we are given this gift. One way to look at it is the gift of faith. We are given the ability to believe. That’s one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, to believe in something that doesn’t make sense, something that’s beyond our imagining and something that changes everything.

I don't know if this is fair, but in my own growing up in the church, in my

own training as a seminarian, in my own work as a priest, and when I knew this mystery of God dwelling inside me, I knew that it could open my heart, the eyes of my heart. I knew there was a way to see things that is different from the way the brain sees things, but that next step of believing it, acting on it, trusting in it, seeing your body relax and take it easy in the midst of a lot of anxiety, not knowing which way to go, not knowing how to deal with the issues that we've been given: loss, pain, suffering, all those things shake us, shake our faith that God is really there. I know those things are there for a purpose much larger than they seem to produce on the surface, but they are also great challenges and tests to see whether or not we have this inner confidence. I know it sounds strange — the power of God inside you and me — to be able to deal with every situation if we call upon it and trust in it. Does that mean it's instantaneous and there's no effort? No, but the reaction we have to things is more important than the things themselves. There are times when we become really frightened. "I don't know what's going to happen to me." We become, sensing our own weaknesses and failures, filled with shame. We think that we're no good, and we're not

going to be able to count on anyone being there for us, because we're not worth anyone being there for us. When we fall into anger over the fact that things are not the way we want them to be, and this isn't the plan, and this isn't what I signed up for, all those feelings that are so normal and real for human beings are there to awaken this amazing promise inside of us. No, I'm not dealing with all these things on my own. I have someone in me, with me, for me that's going to make a difference, and I just wait. I wait for the time when the strength will be there. When it's really important, I'll go through and accept the process of growing into this place of inner peace that is unshakeable and can't be touched by anything happening around us. I'll take my time. I'll wait.

There's something that happens to the human soul, to our essence, when we are with someone we know who knows everything and knows more than we know and knows enough to make sure that everything works together for the good. It's the difference between finding yourself in a foreign country where you can't speak the language. You have no money. Your passport's gone, and you have no idea what to do. And then someone walks along and

says, "I have your passport. I have plenty of money. I have the map. I have the way out. I know this town. Just stick with me. Just follow me. I'm not going to give you all the answers, but just follow me. I'm here, but don't ever lose track of me. Keep your eye on me, because I'm guiding you." That's what it is. It's that kind of almost naïve, childlike faith, and in many ways, that's kind of written off as a kind of sweet oversimplification. It's just the opposite. The oversimplification of faith is when we make it all about us and cause and effect, and right and wrong, and punishment and reward. That's oversimplification, but what I'm talking

about is a radical transformation, a radical change inside you when you begin to feel this inner strength and peace. It doesn't even feel as if you knew where it's coming from. Somehow God does that. I don't know why, when he has this promise of being with us, he never takes over. He never runs the show, which would be fun and easy, but it's a weird, wonderful, transforming process when you can't imagine being able to do anything without him. But you never know whether it's you or him who's doing it. Amazing, enlightening and causing peace, excitement and miracles. Amen.

*Father, your gift of life goes far beyond what we normally understand our life to be. We're not alone. We're not ever put in a position where there is something that we're given that we cannot handle, so bless us with an awareness of this promise, and help us to grow into the place of confidence and trust in your presence. Truly, as the Scripture says today, open the eyes of our hearts so we can feel, see something that makes not much sense to the mind, but grants great peace to the soul. And we ask this in Jesus' name, amen.*

#### **Acts 1:12-14**

After Jesus had been taken up to heaven the apostles returned to Jerusalem

from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem,  
a sabbath day's journey away.

When they entered the city  
they went to the upper room where they were staying,  
Peter and John and James and Andrew,  
Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew,  
James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot,  
and Judas son of James.  
All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer,  
together with some women,  
and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

#### **1 Peter 4:13-16**

Beloved:

Rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ,  
so that when his glory is revealed  
you may also rejoice exultantly.

If you are insulted for the name of Christ, blessed are you,  
for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

But let no one among you be made to suffer  
as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as an intriguer.

But whoever is made to suffer as a Christian should not be ashamed  
but glorify God because of the name.

#### **John 17:1-11a**

Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said,

"Father, the hour has come.

Give glory to your son, so that your son may glorify you,  
just as you gave him authority over all people,  
so that your son may give eternal life to all you gave him.

Now this is eternal life,  
that they should know you, the only true God,  
and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ.  
I glorified you on earth  
by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do.  
Now glorify me, Father, with you,  
with the glory that I had with you before the world began.

"I revealed your name to those whom you gave me out of the world.  
They belonged to you, and you gave them to me,  
and they have kept your word.  
Now they know that everything you gave me is from you,  
because the words you gave to me I have given to them,  
and they accepted them and truly understood that I came from you,  
and they have believed that you sent me.  
I pray for them.  
I do not pray for the world but for the ones you have given me,  
because they are yours, and everything of mine is yours  
and everything of yours is mine,  
and I have been glorified in them.  
And now I will no longer be in the world,  
but they are in the world, while I am coming to you."