

Go Into the Whole World
Ascension (B)
(Acts 1:1-11; Mk 16:14-20)

Today's Gospel is the *conclusion* of Mark, and the first reading is the *beginning* of Acts of the Apostles, which St. Luke indicates is "volume two" of his effort to document the beginnings of Christianity. The first part is the life of Jesus, everything he did and taught, "*until the day he was taken up*" (Acts 1:2). The second part is everything accomplished by the apostles in fulfilling Jesus' mandate to "*go into all the world and preach the gospel*" (Mk 16:15).

It is the *Ascension* that determines the ending of the one phase, and the beginning of the next, not the Resurrection, and certainly not the death of Jesus on the Cross. The Ascension is what brings to conclusion the Incarnation, by which God the Son became man and dwelt among men on earth. The Ascension marks the last time Jesus was seen on earth *in his physical body*. The Resurrection, even though it inaugurated the beginning of the new creation, such that Jesus' body was no longer of the old order of sin and death; nevertheless did not change the fact that it was truly and really Jesus' physical body that was seen and touched. Though his body was glorified, it was still the Incarnate Jesus who was among his apostles for forty days after Easter.

After the Ascension however, Jesus is no longer on earth in his physical body, in the Incarnation. In his physical body, he is now glorified in heaven at the right hand of the Father. Once he has risen, the work of the Son on earth which is the Redemption, is now complete and he can leave. But in his last spoken words on earth, as recorded by St. Matthew (Mt 28:20), Jesus promised, "*Behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age.*" Jesus does continue to remain on earth after the Ascension, but in a different way. He is no longer here physically, but spiritually. And that means "by the Holy Spirit." From the Ascension comes Pentecost. His spiritual presence is no less real than the physical, but it is invisible, just as the Holy Spirit is no less real than the Son, though He is invisible.

This new "spiritual" presence of Jesus on earth is found through the Sacraments. In every sacrament, beginning with Baptism, Jesus the risen Lord is really and truly present, spiritually and concretely, invisible yet tangible via the ritual actions of the sacrament. Every sacrament involves a Pentecost event, an "epiclesis" by which the Holy Spirit comes down upon the material (water, chrism, bread & wine, penitent, bride & groom, etc.), and through a fiery transformation "makes present" the heavenly Lord, our head and shepherd and bridegroom.

Though the work of Redemption is completed by the Cross and Resurrection, another work remains. Jesus did not leave the world in order to abandon his followers leaving them orphans (Jn 14:18). He ascended back to heaven in his physical body so that he could remain in the world by means of a spiritual body, the Church. The “physicality” of Christ is now found in the world through the Church, enlivened by Sacraments, under the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Church which is now the hands of Christ, his feet, his voice, his power and authority. The Church is Christ, in a profound sense—mystical and spiritual, but real. The Church is the Body, of which Christ is the Head. They are one.

Christ leaves the world in one way (physical presence resulting from the Incarnation, limited by time and place), so that he might dwell in the world in another more universal way (spiritual presence resulting from Pentecost, unlimited by time or place). Wherever the Church goes, Christ can be, in all of his power and authority, to heal, teach, and save. Thus he tells the Apostles at the Ascension that they will now possess his full power and authority. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus indicates that mighty signs and miracles will accompany them just as they accompanied him: demons expelled, new tongues spoken, evils rendered impotent, sickness healed (Mk 16:17-18). The apostles, and the whole Church, will act in Christ’s name, with his power, and will accomplish the same mighty deeds which he did on earth, even greater ones (Jn 14:12).

Christ accomplished the Redemption by means of his death and Resurrection, and this was why God became man. Now the Church must accomplish the salvation of the world by bringing that Redemption to all men through the proclamation of the Gospel, and *baptism*. The mandate, or mission of the Church is to baptize all the world (Mk 16:15-16, Mt 28:19).

After 2000 years, this work continues. It is not yet complete. Amazingly, the Gospel has reached this far, to modern man in America! But there yet remain parts of the world that have not received the Gospel, and other parts that need the Gospel announced to it again.

This is our task in our community, even in the households of our parish. The work of evangelization, like the Redemption itself, is not accomplished without trial and suffering, but like the Redemption, it is accomplished through obedience to the Father, and trust in the power of His Holy Spirit. God Himself accomplishes the success of the labor, the conversion of hearts and minds. Our duty is to proclaim the fullness of truth, in a readiness to serve.

As we commemorate the Ascension, let us take up again the mandate Christ gives to the Church, to proclaim the Gospel and baptize all the world.