

Ascension B

May 13, 2021

St. Patrick

Theme: Hugs rather than tugs

“This Jesus...has been taken from you into heaven...”

Words of two angels to the apostles as they gawked up at the sky.

“...taken up from you.”

Has something like this happened to you in the last two months, someone coming up to you, and saying, “I’ve had my two vaccinations. Have you?” And when you nod, “Yes,” the other person opens wide their arms, and you both hug each other closely...something you haven’t done for fifteen months.

Earlier this month, two high school graduates invited me to their graduation. I baptized them eighteen years ago and have been with them at the main moments in their lives, and those of their family. After the graduation ceremony, each of them went up to their parents and embraced them closely, lovingly. Then, each of them came to me, and hugged me, each saying, “I love you.” I won’t forget that precious moment—their hugs, their words.

Friends: Haven’t many of us been “hug-deprived” during these months of isolation? We’ve ached for that loving touch of the other. Ah, yes, for safety we’ve kept our distance—six-feet, actually. We’ve done so for the safety of others, and ourselves. Now, two vaccinations later, we’re enjoying the presence of the other in a fresh way.

“This Jesus...has been taken from you into heaven...” So, we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus.

The acclaimed spiritual writer Henri Nouwen, who died in 1996, puts a novel twist on this feast of Ascension. In his book *The Living Reminder*, he wrote, “The great temptation...is to celebrate only the presence of the Lord while forgetting his absence” (1).

“...while forgetting his absence.”

Indeed, the Risen Jesus **“has been taken from us into heaven.”** After the consecration at this Sunday’s Mass, we’ll sing, **“When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again.”**

Nouwen puts it like this: “The simple signs (of bread, wine and a book), which cannot satisfy all our desires, speak first of all of God’s absence. He has not yet returned; we are still on the road, still waiting, still hoping, still expecting, still longing.”

Yes, this Easter Season we’ve got to sing our “alleluias” with an attitude—joyful, yes, but aching the absence of the Risen Jesus, **“until you come again.”**

At the start of this Easter Season, I spoke about experiencing that “tug” of Jesus’ presence deeply within our soul—using how my 5-year-old brother put it as he felt the “tug” of the kite hidden beyond the clouds. Quite frankly, St. Patrick’s, I’d much rather experience the “hug” of Jesus than only his “tug.”

It’s another paradox within this Easter season, and it hits us hard on the Ascension. The Risen Jesus **“has been taken from us into heaven.”** We can’t forget that Jesus is absent, while at the same time celebrating that he is very much present. And, next Sunday we’ll celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, who is the personal presence of the Risen Jesus while we await his return from the heavens. In his Spirit we know that our Jesus is very close to us, truly with us, and strongly empowering us—especially now after we feel hope following a very hard year.

We can celebrate truly. Still, we can’t forget that the Risen Jesus is absent. We’ve got to sing our “alleluias”—but with an attitude, still aching his absence.

(1) This and the following quotation from Nouwen come from *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (New York: Seabury, 1977), pp. 46-47; quoted by Steve Thomason in “God’s Loving Absence,” <https://www.stevethomason.net/2017/03/10/gods-loving-absence-devo-luke-/235-481>.

General Intercessions

May 16, 2021

Solemnity of the Ascension

Light the fire of the Holy Spirit within us, so that we might live out fully the gifts of the Spirit promised by the ascended Christ; we pray to you, O Lord—

Give hope and support to the midtown Parish of Sacred Heart Church after its devastating fire last weekend; we pray to you, O Lord—

Bring peace with justice to the Holy Land, ending the terrible violence between the Israelis and the Palestinians; we pray to you, O Lord—

Give relief from the coronavirus to the people of India and elsewhere, where the pandemic is raging; lead all in our nation to get the vaccinations, and offer us fresh hope as we are turning the corner toward recovery; we pray to you, O Lord—

Give eternal joy and peace to all who have died, especially Phyllis Somerville and Mary Tenorio Martinez; we pray to you, O Lord—

