

**The Feast of the Ascension of the Lord
29 May 2022**

“[They] returned to Jerusalem with great joy...”

Today, we celebrate the feast of the Ascension of the Lord. By my reckoning, at least, the Ascension is one of the most mysterious episodes in all of Jesus’ earthly life. Just how was he taken up to heaven in a cloud? Why did Jesus leave his disciples when he did? Why didn’t he stick around to “prove” who he was to the world? Why did he leave the evangelization of the world in the hands of sinners—theirs and now ours! What was he thinking?

Although we may indeed have questions about God’s decisions, he is, of course, under no obligation to answer them. When Job complained about God’s decisions, God responded by saying, in effect, “I’m God and you’re not.” So when it comes to the divine mysteries surrounding the Ascension, we may never fully understand them.

That still leaves us with at least one important Ascension mystery which seems to be not so much about what God decided, but rather about what the disciples did. Listen again to the last four verses of Luke’s Gospel: “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, raised his hands, and blessed them. As he blessed them, he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. They did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple praising God” (Luke 24:50-53).

“They...returned to Jerusalem with great joy”? Seriously? What’s up with that? Their Lord and Savior, friend and teacher, master and Redeemer, had just left them, just abandoned them. Yes, he had promised to send the Holy Spirit to them, but they must have

wondered how that could possibly be better for them than the actual physical presence of the risen rabbi from Nazareth? When someone we love goes away, by death or desertion, design or destiny, we experience grief, not joy. We may feel depression or despair, and depending on the circumstance, we may also feel resentment and bitterness. Yet, when the Lord departed from his friends, they were filled with great joy. It just doesn't seem natural.

However, we see that pattern over and over again in the Gospels, particularly when a follower of Jesus would most want to remain with him. Consider the Gerasene demoniac from whom Jesus drove out a "legion" of demons. Before the exorcism, he "was possessed by demons. For a long time he had not worn any clothes; he did not live in a house but among the tombstones...he used to be tied with chains and fetters, but he would break the bonds" (Luke 8:27, 29). Afterwards, however, the townspeople found him "sitting at [Jesus'] feet, dressed and in his full senses" (Lk 8:35). The townspeople were terrified and asked Jesus to leave, at which point, "the man from whom the devils had departed asked to come with him, but he sent him away with the words, 'Go back home and recount all that God has done for you.' The man went all through the town making public what Jesus had done for him" (Lk 8:38-39). Though his request to join Jesus was denied, he nonetheless embraced the mission Jesus gave him to spread the Good News.

Mary Magdalene responded the same way on Easter Sunday morning. Grief-stricken in the wake of the crucifixion and distraught that the Lord's body was gone from the tomb, a weeping Mary suddenly encountered the very one she had sought—the Risen Lord who called her by name. In the very moment she heard his voice and recognized

him, in the moment when his comfort and consolation might have been most needed and valued by her, he immediately distanced himself from her: “Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father” (Jn 20:17a). Instead of gestures of compassion and reunion, Jesus promptly gave Mary a mission: “Go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (Jn 20:17b). Despite the Lord’s apparent rebuff, Mary embraced and implement his command at once, thus becoming the first messenger—the first “apostle”—of the resurrection.

We see something similar in the two disciples Jesus accompanied later that same day on the road to Emmaus. Recall that soon after meeting them, Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith: “Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke!” (Lk 24:25). The Lord then opened their eyes and hearts to all of the Scriptures which prophesied about him. Still not recognizing him, they invited Jesus to stay with them for supper. Then, suddenly, in the very moment that “he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread,” he vanished. In that stunning moment of recognition and reconciliation, when the two disciples undoubtedly would have wanted to share their joy, relief and wonder with him, Jesus didn’t stick around. Instead, he simply left, just as he left the Gerasene man who had been freed of demons, just like Mary Magdalene at the tomb.

And, significantly, just like in each of those cases, the disciples in Emmaus were compelled to immediately share with others the Good News of their encounter with the Lord. Thus, we see the counter-intuitive result of Jesus’ rebuke and instruction. The two disciples didn’t complain about his harsh criticism, or accuse Jesus of deception

for not revealing himself earlier, or grouse about his departure after the fact. Instead, as Pope Francis has noted, Jesus “left them alone with burning hearts and an irresistible desire to set out immediately.”

That’s just what happened on the day the Lord ascended: Jesus left his disciples alone, but with burning hearts and an irresistible desire to set out immediately. “They returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple praising God.” Earlier, I commented that such a response to their beloved Lord’s departure was not natural, and it wasn’t. Rather, it was *supernatural*.

In each of these moments when Jesus abruptly left someone behind, they responded with missionary commitment. Why? Because they had each experienced the supernatural blessing of the Lord’s mercy, and wanted to share it with others. The Gerasene demoniac had been rescued from a legion of demons. Mary Magdalene had been delivered from seven demons, and on Easter morning, she was rescued from her grief and confusion. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were rescued from their despair and ignorance, and over the course of 40 days after the resurrection, the apostles themselves were healed of the shame and guilt they experienced after their Lord’s arrest and execution. They all had a personal relationship with their divine savior, a relationship rooted in his loving rescue of them.

So, in the flood of God’s divine mercy, these rescued souls were therefore compelled to go forth with hearts full of joy and gratitude to proclaim the Good News about what God had done for them. Indeed, ten days after the Ascension, the burning hearts of the disciples were supernaturally stoked again, this time by the divine fire of the Spirit descending on Pentecost. We are their spiritual descendants and are

called to carry the same torch of faith. So, today, on the feast of the Ascension, let us pray for the same great joy the apostles had when they returned to Jerusalem. Let us pray that we might so appreciate the Lord's mercy that the fire of the Holy Spirit might descend upon us, inspiring us to joyfully spread the flame of God's love and the light of his truth throughout a world in such desperate need of the Gospel.