

Feast of the Ascension

Cycle B, 4.16.21

Acts 1:1-11/Ephesians 1:17-23/

Mark 16:15-20

YOU ARE THE “BACK-UP PLAN” — SO GET TO WORK!

Things are really looking up, aren't they? The CDC's announcement a few days ago was surprising but welcome news. All of us who have been vaccinated can finally breathe a sigh of relief, and we can take that breath without masks on – indoors or outdoors, in small or large groups. Some felt the move was premature, but other health experts said it was a reasonable decision based on how effective the vaccines are and how many people are now immune. I trust that all of us have been vaccinated. That will make our re-entry into communal parish life a lot easier. I think most of us will take a slow and gradual approach with the new information. Most places like restaurants and stores still require that we be masked. We haven't received any revision to Covid protocol from our County Health Department or from the Diocese of Oakland, so our parish regulations will continue for the time being. But that may soon change and there is a feeling of freedom and the hope that we are on our way to recovery.

Things are looking up in the scriptures for our Feast of the Ascension as well. I mean, literally – looking up. We heard it in the Acts of the Apostles describing the Ascension: ... *as they were looking on, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.* We heard it in Mark's narrative: *So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven.* The beginning of e.e.cummings

poem, “If Up's the Word,” always rings in my ears on this Feast:

***if up's the word;
and a world grows greener
minute by second and most by more
if death is the loser and life is the winner
(and beggars are rich but misers are poor)
—let's touch the sky.***



My favorite characters in the Ascension story are the two guys in white -- some assume they were angels -- who tell the apostles to stop looking up? *Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?*

There is a wonderful mystery play from the Middle Ages about the Ascension, updated in language for our purpose. It's said that after Jesus was lifted up from the earth and was ascending to heaven, the two men dressed in white follow after, straining to catch up with Him. These angels cry out: *“Jesus! Jesus! Wait for us!”* Jesus turns to greet them, and as they continue to ascend together, says: *“Yes, my friends! Well done!”* One of the angels replies: *“That is what we should say to you, dear Lord, for you have done all that has been asked of you! But what will happen next? Isn't there more to be done?”*

Jesus answers: *“Well, of course! There's always more to be done! But weren't you paying attention down there? Didn't you hear me tell them to go forth into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to*

every creature -- continuing my life and work, reconciling the whole world to myself!" The two angels look at one another somewhat hesitantly, and then look back at Jesus. One of them cautiously says: *"Well, certainly we heard all that. But haven't you been paying attention to them? Do you really think you can count on that lot?"* *"He's right, you know,"* the other angel says. *"Honestly, what's your back-up plan? What will you do if those you have left behind don't continue your work?"* Jesus pauses for a moment and then says, simply, *"There is no back-up plan."*



The apostles were a feeble little band, but there was nothing more Jesus could do. There is no back-up plan because the grace set free by the Resurrection, the Ascension, and ultimately the gift of the Holy Spirit was all they needed. And it's all we need. The abiding question is whether and how we will choose to join in the Lord's work. Will we participate fully in the mending of creation, or will we choose to stand back and watch from a comfortable distance? And what a tragedy that would be, a choice to refuse the invitation to be fully alive in the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself gave us the promise in John's gospel: *"The person who trusts me will not only do what I'm doing but even greater things, because I, on my way to the Father, am giving you the same work to do that I've been doing. You can count on it."* Wow! We'll do "greater

things" than Jesus? It's a gift of love, this calling we have received to be as Jesus was and do as Jesus did, as members of Christ's body. By baptism, we are embraced and challenged to receive the love God offers us in Jesus, and then to move out to share that love unconditionally.

For our hearts to be enlightened we have to allow God's grace to work within us. We have to open ourselves to God's spirit of wisdom and revelation, the truth of this Feast: God is at work within us through Christ. Christ is the powerful one! He has called us to hope—never to despair! Every other kind of rule and authority and power and dominion in this age in the age to come has been placed beneath his feet. The risen Christ reigns! But we have no need to stand staring up at the heavens waiting for Jesus to come again. Now we are his body—the Church. We are the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way!

I recently read a moving story about someone who has carried out that command of Christ to be Good News for others. It happened during this past year of the pandemic. Pamela Addison never expected to be a widow at 36. A year ago, she held her six-month-old son and two-year-old daughter and watched helplessly as paramedics rushed her husband Martin to the hospital. It was the last time Pamela would see her husband alive. Martin Addison died 26 days later of COVID-19. It was a devastatingly frightening time for the young mom. But then she received a sympathy card from another young widow whose husband had died of the virus just a few weeks before. *"You're not alone,"* the card read.

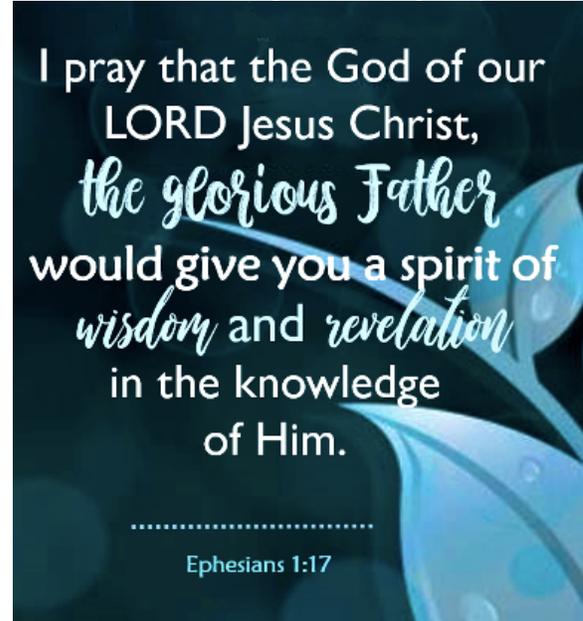
Pamela was soon in contact with the card's sender, Kristina Scorpo. Last fall, the two now single moms launched a Facebook support group, *Young Widows and Widowers of COVID-19*, for women and men like them struggling as single parents in the isolation brought on by the pandemic. The group has more than 400 members across the country and the United Kingdom. *"We didn't plan on this,"* Kristina says. *"We didn't plan to be widowed at 36 or 33. We didn't plan to raise our kids without our partners that we saw our lives with and we saw a future with."*



The members of the group are especially welcoming to those who have just lost their husbands or wives, when it feels hopeless, like there isn't going to be happiness again or joy. Pamela explains: *"I feel like we can help them. Even if they're not where I am now, I can support them. And that's healing for me, too."* What these two women have done is the work Jesus challenges all of us to take on. In every kindness we offer, in every word of encouragement and comfort we utter, in every moment we spend listening and supporting, we proclaim the Risen Jesus' Gospel of compassion, mercy and reconciliation. Every good work — however small or hidden — is a spark of the light of the Risen Christ in our midst.

So take St. Paul at his word and believe in the gifts God has given you:

the hope to which you have been called, the riches of God's glorious inheritance, and the immeasurable greatness of his power.



Use the power of God's grace to imagine the many ways that you can echo the life of Christ in your own daily living. Then use the eyes of your heart to believe that you can do it and pray for the enlightenment that God's Holy Spirit brings to us.

John Kasper, OSFS