

# *Gratitude Foundation*

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*“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?  
Has only this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”*

(Lk. 17:15-17)

## **Solemnity of the Ascension—Year B**

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*“In all things give thanks, it is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”*

(1 Thess: 5:18)

# Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord

## Reading I

### Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus,  
I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught  
until the day he was taken up,  
after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit  
to the apostles whom he had chosen.  
He presented himself alive to them  
by many proofs after he had suffered,  
appearing to them during forty days  
and speaking about the kingdom of God.  
While meeting with them,  
he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem,  
but to wait for “the promise of the Father  
about which you have heard me speak;  
for John baptized with water,  
but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

When they had gathered together they asked him,  
“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”  
He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons  
that the Father has established by his own authority.  
But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,  
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,  
throughout Judea and Samaria,  
and to the ends of the earth.”

When he had said this, as they were looking on,  
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.  
While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going,  
suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them.  
They said, “Men of Galilee,  
why are you standing there looking at the sky?  
This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven  
will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.”

## Responsorial Psalm

### Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9

**R. (6) God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.**

All you peoples, clap your hands,  
shout to God with cries of gladness,  
For the LORD, the Most High, the awesome,  
is the great king over all the earth.

**R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.**

God mounts his throne amid shouts of joy;  
the LORD, amid trumpet blasts.  
Sing praise to God, sing praise;  
sing praise to our king, sing praise.

**R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.**

For king of all the earth is God;  
sing hymns of praise.  
God reigns over the nations,  
God sits upon his holy throne.

**R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.**

## Reading II

### Ephesians 1:17-23

Brothers and sisters:

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,  
give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation  
resulting in knowledge of him.  
May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened,  
that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call,  
what are the riches of glory  
in his inheritance among the holy ones,  
and what is the surpassing greatness of his power  
for us who believe,  
in accord with the exercise of his great might,  
which he worked in Christ,  
raising him from the dead  
and seating him at his right hand in the heavens,  
far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion,  
and every name that is named  
not only in this age but also in the one to come.  
And he put all things beneath his feet  
and gave him as head over all things to the church,  
which is his body,  
the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

## Reading II (Option B)

### Ephesians 4:1-13 or 4:1-7, 11-13

Brothers and sisters,  
I, a prisoner for the Lord,  
urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received,  
with all humility and gentleness, with patience,  
bearing with one another through love,  
striving to preserve the unity of the spirit  
through the bond of peace:  
one body and one Spirit,  
as you were also called to the one hope of your call;  
one Lord, one faith, one baptism;  
one God and Father of all,  
who is over all and through all and in all.

But grace was given to each of us  
according to the measure of Christ's gift.  
Therefore, it says:

*He ascended on high and took prisoners captive;  
he gave gifts to men.*

What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended  
into the lower regions of the earth?

The one who descended is also the one who ascended  
far above all the heavens,  
that he might fill all things.

And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets,  
others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers,  
to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry,  
for building up the body of Christ,  
until we all attain to the unity of faith  
and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature to manhood,  
to the extent of the full stature of Christ.

## Alleluia

### Matthew 28:19a, 20b

**R. Alleluia, alleluia.**

Go and teach all nations, says the Lord;  
I am with you always, until the end of the world.

**R. Alleluia, alleluia.**

# Gospel

## Mark 16:15-20

Jesus said to his disciples:

“Go into the whole world  
and proclaim the gospel to every creature.  
Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved;  
whoever does not believe will be condemned.  
These signs will accompany those who believe:  
in my name they will drive out demons,  
they will speak new languages.  
They will pick up serpents with their hands,  
and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them.  
They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them,  
was taken up into heaven  
and took his seat at the right hand of God.  
But they went forth and preached everywhere,  
while the Lord worked with them  
and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.

# Exegesis

## Acts 1:1-11

Some years ago, I led a bible study on the *Gospel of Luke* and immediately followed with a study of the *Acts of the Apostles*. In that experience I was stuck by the seamless transition of the mission of Jesus from His earthly life to His Body the Church. As the Risen Lord appeared to Saul He said, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute Me." He makes no distinction between Himself and His Church. The terms in verse eight, i.e., *power, Spirit, come upon*, echo the words of the angel to Mary in the Annunciation. The same Spirit who brought forth Christ in the womb of Mary is about to bring forth the Church in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is portrayed as a Spirit filled, a Spirit led, and a Spirit giving person. Now Luke begins this next era of the mission of Jesus by the Baptism of the Holy Spirit on the Church. Now the promise of John the Baptist is being fulfilled, "On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, He is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit." (Jn 1:33)

I once asked the question during one of my school Mass homilies: "Why did the Risen Lord spend 40 days on earth before He ascended into heaven?" A little girl responded, "because He still had to teach us some stuff." What did He teach us? He taught us that there is a continuity between this life and the next. The wounds in His hands and feet and in His side were visible. He appeared in His glorified body that now transcended the laws of time as space. He ate and drank with the apostles. The Risen Lord showed us a world beyond death. He taught us that God's love is more powerful than death. Most of all He empowered and commissioned the apostles and us to continue His mission, to bring the good news of salvation to the whole world.

The Ascension always recalls for me the Transfiguration. The two angels, otherworldly figures, Elijah and Moses are present, the mountaintop, the cloud, and the witness of the apostles all seem to tie the Transfiguration and the Ascension together. The Transfiguration, like the Ascension, gives us a glimpse into the world beyond. God wants us to know that there is a world beyond this world, a world beyond our sight.

The Resurrection appearances of the Risen Lord are a passing of the torch and a call to action. They conclude with the Ascension and the words of the angels, "Why do you stand there looking at the sky?" In other words, get moving!

## Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9

Psalm 47 is believed to be an enthronement psalm that was used to begin a synagogue liturgy. More specifically it was an enthronement hymn celebrating the new year celebration and celebrating the kinship of God. Yahweh is praised as *Elyon*, i.e. *awesome or Most High*. The image of *Elyon* is an epithet of Yahweh taken from Canaanite polytheism.<sup>2</sup> *Elyon* was the most powerful overlord of both the divine world as well as the human. The focus of God as Lord of both heaven and earth is fitting for the feast of the Ascension.

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1. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, The New Testament, Ignatius Press, S.F. page 207, F.N. 1:8.

2. Brown, Fitzmyer, Murphy; New Jerome Biblical Commentary; P.H. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. page 543.

## Exegesis (Continued)

### Ephesians 1:17-23

Our passage today taken from the First Chapter of *Ephesians* beginning at verse 15 is entitled *Paul's Prayer*. It is introduced by the preceding verses: "In Christ you also have heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation, have believed in Him, and were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit... for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you and remembering you in my prayers." (Eph 1:13-16) Paul is praying that the Holy Spirit will enlighten the eyes of their hearts. The *heart* in the biblical meaning represents the center of the person, where thinking, willing and feeling happen. It is the core of the person. The gift of Wisdom and revelation that the Holy Spirit promises is the enlightenment of the heart to Spiritual truth. St. Augustine called this enlightenment Divine Illumination. All of this is made possible by the Paschal Mystery, the Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord. The promise will be fulfilled in the gift of Pentecost which will fill the world with the Holy Spirit and so is now available to every human heart indiscriminately.

### Ephesians 4:1-13 or 4:1-7, 11-13

Chapter 4 of *Ephesians* is entitled *Unity in the Body of Christ*. In the *High Priestly Prayer* of Jesus at the end of the *Last Supper Discourse* of John's Gospel, Jesus prayed, "Father may they be one as You and I are one." Jesus had just promised the gift of the Holy Spirit and the gift of His indwelling presence. It is precisely this gift that enables us to become one. We are called to share in that same Spirit.

It is through the descending and ascending of Christ that makes oneness with God and with each other possible. Jesus humbled Himself to travel into the depth of our humanity, into our fallen human nature, into suffering and death, traveling to the depth of God forsakenness, to farthest regions of hell, to the limits of separation from the Father, out of love for us, to save us and to redeem us. In the words of St. Anselm, "What is not assumed is not redeemed." In that act of supreme love, Jesus is raised from the dead and ascends "far above all the heavens." He is exalted to the right hand of the Father. And so, He now "fills all things."

### Mark 16:15-20

Some years ago, I helped some middle school students write and perform a *Resurrection Play*. One of my tasks was to write the script for the student who would play the Risen Lord. As I compiled those words it struck me just how focused those words were on the mission and on action. Our Gospel passage today begins with words of action, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature." The other Gospels include similar calls to mission, e.g. "As the Father has sent me so I send you." (Jn 20:21)

The calls to action are supported by a promise that He would be with them always. With the commissioning comes a promise of power and authority, e.g. the power to heal and to forgive sins, and to cast out demons. With the commissioning comes a promise of protection from (spiritually) deadly things. Most importantly the commissioning came with the promise to work with and through them (us).

## Reflection

This weekend we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord. Christian art depicts Jesus as rising into the atmosphere and disappearing from sight. Scripture tells us that “He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him from their sight...” (Acts 1:9) St. Paul writes in his *Letter to the Ephesians*: “What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended into the lower regions of the earth? The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.” (Eph 4:10) In the *Apostles Creed* we say the He descended into Hell. In the original Creed it was said that He descended to the depth of Hell. Jesus traveled to the depth of God forsakenness for us, then was raised from the dead and ascended to the highest heavens, so that in the words of St. Paul He might “fill all things.”

This is what the Ascension, and the feast of Pentecost that follows, is all about. It is about the divine life of God pouring into our world, “filling all things.” To make this possible Jesus enters fully into our humanity. He travels to the depth of God forsakenness on the Cross. He cried out, “My God, My God why have you forsaken Me.” He descended into the darkness of the tomb, into the depth of emptiness, He allows Himself to die a real death, i.e., separation from the Father. He descended into our humanity to redeem our fallen human nature, to transform and transfigure our existence.

The Resurrection and the Ascension are about the rising of humanity. We are now able to resurrect and to ascend to a new level of existence. We are now able to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in a new way. We are able to receive the indwelling of divine life, from the pouring out of God’s life as at Pentecost. Once He was with us as He walked the dusty roads in Palestine. He was present to many, to the crowds that gathered around Him. After He was raised from the dead He appeared to the Apostles and to many people at various times over a 40-day period. Now He is present to all for all of time and all of eternity. Now as St. Augustine used to say, “He is closer to us than we are to ourselves.”

The gift of Pentecost that we now await is the gift of divine life pouring into our world. God now wants to mediate His life into and through us. We are called to become earthen vessels, united to Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, bearing the fruits of that Spirit in our world. Love, joy and peace must fill us and then flow from us into the world around us. As we come to the Altar this weekend, we should think about how we can become the gift that we receive, the Body of Christ. When we do that, we ascend to a new level of being. Our calling is to become Spirit filled, Spirit led, and Spirit giving disciples of Jesus.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of us your faithful and enkindle within us the fire of Your love!

Yours in Jesus and Mother Mary,





## Personal Witness

As a priest I feel strongly that God has been calling me to assure people of His amazing love for them. As I ask God daily in prayer what He wants me to communicate, repeatedly I hear the response of God, "Tell them how much I love them and tell them often. Everyone exists because of My love. I do not want a world without them."

During most of my years of priesthood I have been blessed to be the pastor of a parish with a Catholic elementary school. One of my great joys was celebrating the school Mass with the children at least weekly. At every Mass I would assure the children that God loved them, and that God did not want a world without them. Once during one of my homilies I asked a rhetorical question, "how often have I told you that God loves you." The little girl that had a nak for answering without being called on blurted out, "about a bajillion times."

A mother of one of our school families was killed in a tragic domestic accident. That evening, I was sitting with the father, two young children, ages 6 and 7, and the grandparents. There were no words to comfort the shock and grief that we all felt. The seven-year-old child looked at me in the silence and asked, "Father, if God does not want a world without my mother, how come she is gone, and I will never see her again?" I will never forget the look on that child's face. I had no answer.

That night I was not able to sleep. I was holding the bible in my hand and was moved to read the *Book of Job*. Like Job, I was angry with God and was searching for answers. Job demands a meeting with God and God grants his wish. In the end Job stands in awe and says, "I have dealt with things that I do not understand; things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know." (Job 42:3) The standard answer to the question, why do bad things happen to good people, is that there is no answer in this life and that we are asked to have faith and trust in God. That night that answer was not good enough for me, I was demanding more from God.

About 3 a.m. I was on my third or fourth reading of the *Book of Job*. I was in that section that is entitled *The Lord's Speech*, which covers four chapters, i.e. 38-41. God responds to Job and takes him on a whirlwind tour of creation. I fell asleep wondering why.

That morning, I had a dream. God said, "It is true, I do not want a world without Mary (deceased mom), but the world is bigger than the world that you can see right now." When I awoke, I realized that like Job, God had taken me to a place beyond my questions, beyond my grief. To God all are alive. He is God of the living and the dead.

In the Ascension scene we are told that the Risen Lord was simply taken from their sight. However, He came to show us a world beyond physical sight and the physical senses. I now see the Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery, and the totality of Sacred Scripture as the revelation of a world beyond the world that we can see. God wants us to know that His world, the world He desires to share with us is bigger than the world in which we now live.

Through the gift of His Paschal Mystery, through the gift of His dying and rising, through the gift of His Ascension, and though the gift of Pentecost we are able to experience this Spiritual realm. This is now possible "with the eyes of our hearts enlightened" by the Holy Spirit to see as God sees and know as God knows, and to God all are alive. It is a big and wonderful world that God wants to share with us, and for that we should all be grateful!

