

## The Ascension of the Lord

Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 46:2-3, 6-9

Ephesians 1:17-23

Mark 16:15-20

Today is the Feast of the Ascension of Christ – and in this feast we can discern both a proclamation and a promise. What does it proclaim? That we are body and soul, and that our bodies are good. And what does it promise? That Christ has not abandoned us, and that we—body and soul—are destined for future glory.

Let's start with the proclamation, because this message is very much needed right now. Our world is filled with two extreme and opposite views of the human person. The first says that we are just a body without a soul. This is the claim of modern atheists: you are just a collection of atoms, and when those die, you are no more. Of course, if that were true, it would seem that part of “you” dies every time you lose a skin cell or get a haircut.

At the other extreme is the idea that we are a soul “trapped” in a body. Sometimes, you'll hear people say of the dead that they are now free from their bodies, like a cicada breaking out of its shell, as if the body is a prison for the soul. And of course, these days it's not uncommon to hear people speak of women trapped in men's bodies, and vice versa. But this is just the opposite extreme error – where the first camp says you're just your body, the second camp says that you're not your body.

The truth is halfway between these two extremes: you are your soul, and you are your body. And just as your soul is a beautiful work of art, created by God and reflecting his grandeur, the same is true of your body. How do we know this? Christ shows us this profound truth in several ways:

- Through his Incarnation: He takes on a true human body and a true human soul;
- Through his Passion: He saves the world through his bodily death.
- Through his Resurrection: Jesus doesn't leave his body in the tomb – he glorifies it and restores it to life.
- Through his Ascension: Jesus Christ doesn't enter into his glory by abandoning his body, but by glorifying it and bringing it into heaven. And he wouldn't do that if our bodies were prisons or were evil.
- Through the Eucharist: At every Mass, we offer to the Father the Body and Blood, as well as the Soul and Divinity, of Jesus Christ.
- Through Our Lady's Assumption: Lest we think that the only body in heaven is Christ's, he draws his mother towards himself. And he promises to do the same for us.

This is an important message for us, because we live in an age which treats our bodies—and especially women’s bodies—as objects. Not coincidentally, so many people today are unhappy with their bodies. But it’s more than that. Sometimes we speak and think as if the body is just an occasion of sin. It’s easy to imagine, “you know, I could be a great saint, if I didn’t have all of these bodily urges and desires.”

And yes, our bodies can be a bit rebellious – we need to keep a close eye to make sure that we’re not wandering into sin. But that’s true of our souls, too. We are works of God, we are his sons and daughters, but we’re wounded – in body and in soul – by Original Sin.

And that’s why the promise of Christ is so important. Although he has ascended into heaven, he has not abandoned us. Saint Augustine reminds us that Christ “did not leave heaven when he came down to us; nor did he withdraw from us when he went up again into heaven.”

There can be a tendency for people to think of the Ascension as a kind of sad event, in which the disciples were downhearted at losing their master. After all, their beloved master would no longer be with them in the flesh, and they would now in a sense have to go it alone. Sure they would soon receive the Holy Spirit, but it wouldn’t be the same.

But listen to St Luke’s account of this event:

“Now as he blessed them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven. They **worshipped him** and then went back to Jerusalem **full of joy**; and they were continually in the Temple praising God.”

I suspect that it was only at the Ascension that the penny fully dropped for the disciples regarding who this Jesus really was. At the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John were given a glimpse of Christ’s glory—a preview, as it were—though they clearly weren’t entirely sure what was going on and what it all meant. Then following his Resurrection a number of disciples were privileged to witness the risen Christ in his glorified body, and again I suspect that many were so blown away by the fact that he had risen that they didn’t know quite what to make of the obviously different body they could now see.

But at the Ascension, they could now see plainly that Jesus was God. Let me read you a quote about this from Saint Leo the Great:

The blessed apostles, though they had been strengthened by so many miracles and instructed by so much teaching, took fright at the cruel suffering of the Lord’s passion and could not accept his Resurrection without hesitation. Yet they made such progress through his Ascension that they now found joy in what had terrified them before. They were able to fix their minds on Christ’s divinity as he sat at the right hand of his Father, since what was presented to

their bodily eyes no longer hindered them from turning all their attention to the realisation that he had not left his Father when he came down to earth, nor had he abandoned his disciples when he ascended into heaven.

The penny finally dropped – Jesus is God, and we have God on our side! No wonder they were so full of joy! And so following the Ascension the disciples did not hang their heads, but prayed with complete trust in Christ’s promise of sending the Advocate. Indeed, this period of nine days between the Ascension and Pentecost was the “original Novena”, during which the Lord’s disciples joyfully prayed in anticipation of receiving the Holy Spirit.

And so we too can pray with joyful anticipation, knowing that Christ has paved the way for us. Today we celebrate how Christ the Head went first. On the feast of the Assumption in August, we celebrate what happens after this: how he brought his Blessed Mother, body and soul, to join him in heaven. And all of us, provided we stay true to him, are promised the same.

Jesus expressed this promise in a beautiful way. In the Jewish culture of his day, there were two stages to a wedding. Remember that there were no “bachelor pads” at the time, so unmarried people tended to live with their parents. So the new bride and groom would get married, and then the groom would have a few months to go and prepare a home for his bride. This is how Jesus expresses His relationship with the Church:

“In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” (John 14:2-3)

This Ascension, we celebrate the Lord’s going forth into Heaven to prepare a place for us. Let us live in anticipation of his glorious return, so that where he is, we may also be.