

Today, the feast of the Ascension, is a feast in disguise. If I asked what this feast was about, I think most of you would say, “It’s about Jesus returning to his Father in heaven.” Or, “It’s about Jesus going up into the clouds and leaving Earth until he comes again.” These aren’t wrong answers, but they’re *insufficient* answers. We’re missing the real point of the feast because we’ve fallen for the disguise. We’re looking up into the sky instead of pondering the real meaning.

We hear two versions today – the first from Acts and the second from the gospel of Mark. As you bible study folks know, Luke is the author of both the gospel that carries his name and Acts of the Apostles, and he relates the ascension story in each account, with some minor variations. Mark’s gospel version that I just read is taken from the so-called “longer ending”, a section of the gospel that was clearly added well after the original gospel of Mark was written. Each version of the event is slightly different, but the core story is identical – Jesus is present at one moment and then he is taken away, up into the sky. At the most obvious, literal level, Jesus has exited the scene, and we are left alone. Not a very happy feast, you may think!

So what’s the real meaning? If it’s not about Jesus going into the clouds, then what’s it about? The feast of the Ascension is actually celebrating two things: *transition and promise*. So let’s look at each aspect. First, *transition*. Jesus, the physical presence, the human being the disciples ate and drank with, is by nature limited to one place at a time. The Ascension marks the end of God’s investment in the world in this particular human/God way and celebrates the entry of God into the world in a new way, through Christ and the Holy Spirit. No longer is God limiting his powerful presence. He is expanding his influence across every human being who is willing to see, to hear, to open their heart and mind to a presence that is pervasive and life-changing. Now that’s worth celebrating!

But what do you think the disciples were thinking as they stood there, watching Jesus go up? What emotions were running through them? A little amazement, I’m sure. But beyond that, what else? Fear? Uncertainty? Maybe a longing for the way things used to be? Matthew’s gospel records that some had doubts. Transitions are not easy to navigate, are they? The words of the men in white ring out, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?” In other words, “Snap out of it! Transitions are the reality of our existence. Get moving, there’s much more to come!”

So, how do we bring this Feast home, make it real for us here and now? Think about the transition challenges in your life. Example: a friend of mine has a 15 year old daughter who wants to be treated as an adult woman. Fair enough. But she's run away from home three times since January. Is this transition moving in a constructive direction? Is the girl entirely at fault? Are the parents? What might be standing in the way of a good transition here? Fear, uncertainty, rigidity, doubt, recklessness?

I received a letter from a prison inmate who is getting out in the next 3 months. He writes asking for help in making the transition from a rigid institutionalized life to the free-for-all chaos of our world. It was very frustrating to me to admit that there was very little I could do for him. Think about it. He is undereducated, unused to holding a job, and carrying a prison record on his back. Even though he's paid his debt to society for the crime he committed, he faces a severe uphill road to a life of productive existence. Would your employer hire an ex-felon? Under any circumstances? Is this transition moving in a constructive direction? What is blocking the path? Fear, stubbornness, uncertainty.

A man comes to me and asks if I'll help him get his prior marriage annulled. Of course, that's part of my job description. I explain to him how the process works and what's involved and inevitably the question arises, "Why do I have to go through all of this? This sounds like an emotional, maybe painful process. Why?" I stress the healing nature of the annulment process, how it gives the petitioner an opportunity to revisit the past and hopefully view the negative marital experience in a new light of forgiveness and honest assessment. Some embrace the process, embrace the lesson in the transition from married back to single. Others smile, shake my hand, and leave – never to be back. Transition is hard.

Now read the last sentence of the gospel of Mark carefully. Listen: "...they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs." Note the active tense – the Lord worked with them. Note the last sentence in today's first reading: "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." This is the flip side of today's feast of the Transition. It is also the feast of *Promise*. Matthew's gospel says it best, "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

*Promise.* Our Church is often criticized for all of the rules and regulations surrounding the receipt of the sacraments. We have baptismal promises, acts of faith, marriage vows, religious commitments to poverty, chastity, and obedience. In a society, a world in which nothing is sacred, nothing is eternal, and promises are made to be broken, the Church seems hopelessly out of touch and overbearing. Alas, our silly society has been fooled by the Evil One's disguise! Promises and commitments are not something to avoid! They're to be embraced! When I promise to live my baptismal call, when I promise to share my life with my spouse, when I vow obedience to my Bishop, when I promise to be available to my Parish whether convenient or inconvenient, I'm not limiting myself. On the contrary, I'm building my life on rocks, a foundation of certainty in an uncertain world. I don't need to worry if my spouse will stay with me, that my Church will pray for me, that my God will uphold me. There are promises that have been made. And I will keep mine.

To summarize, transition is a reality in our existence. Transition is hard, fraught with uncertainty, fear, and doubts. The way to navigate transitions is to rely on promises, rely on people of integrity, rely on a God who promises to never leave us, to hold us through it all. In turn, our embrace of a life of commitment and promise is a rock foundation that cannot be breached. And there's nothing like holding onto a big rock when the world is spinning out of control. Yes, transition means letting go, but it also means holding on. Don't be fooled! Don't look at the sky, look at who's sitting next to you. We're here for each other.