

## Ascension (6/2/11 – *What Christ's Ascension Means to Us*)

In the Name of JESUS. [Amen]

The first half of the *Church Year* – the *Festival Half* as it is called – seeks to track and place us in the rhythm of our Savior's very own *Nativity* and Life, His *Passion* and *Resurrection* ... and, as we have it this evening, His glorious *Ascension* to the right hand of God the Father. This *Church Year* is not some haphazard contrivance of men. It is the Church's way of living out the very Scriptures on which our faith is founded. We rehearse those truths essential to our faith each year, since this side of the heavenly Paradise our faith remains ever weak ... and our flesh needs be convinced ever anew.

Dearly beloved, it is now the fortieth day since the blessed and glorious *Resurrection* of our Lord Jesus Christ – that true Temple of God, Whom the wickedness of the Jews seemingly had overthrown at the Cross three days prior. These forty days were – by holy appointment – devoted to our most profitable instruction, so that during the period that the Lord thus lingered in His bodily presence our faith in the *Resurrection* might be fortified by needful proofs. As St. John says very clearly at the end of his Gospel: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His Name.* [JN 20.30-31] For Christ's Death had much disturbed the disciples' hearts, and a kind of inactivity of distrust had crept over their grief-laden minds at His torture on the Cross ... at His giving up His Spirit ... and at His lifeless Body's burial. When the holy women brought word of the stone rolled away from the tomb, now emptied of the Body, and of the angels bearing witness to the living Lord, their words seemed like mad ravings to the Apostles and other disciples – as the Gospel-story has revealed. This doubtfulness, the result of sinful human weakness, the Spirit of Truth would most assuredly not have permitted to exist even for a moment in His own preacher's hearts, had not their trembling anxiety and careful hesitation laid the foundations of our very own faith. It is **our own** perplexities and **our own** dangers that we see also in the Apostles. Thus it is

**we ourselves** who in these men are taught how to meet the word-wrangling of the ungodly and the arguments of earthly wisdom. We are instructed by what they saw. We are taught by what they heard. We are convinced by what they touched. Thus, we see how our gracious Lord makes all things work together for good [ROM 8.28]. And what is indeed evil – such as doubt and unbelief – can be turned to good [GEN 50.20]. Let us give thanks to the Divine arrangement and plan by which the slowness of belief of the holy Fathers serves that we might **not** doubt ... but believe.

Those days, therefore, dearly beloved – which intervened between the Lord's *Resurrection* and *Ascension* – did not pass by in uneventful leisure. Rather, great mysteries were confirmed in them ... deep truths revealed. In them the fear of awful death was removed, and the immortality not only of the soul but also of the flesh was established. In them, through the Lord's breathing upon them, the Holy Spirit is poured upon all the Apostles, and to the Church and her undershepherds was given the keys of the kingdom. Then it was that the Lord joined the two disciples as a companion on the road to Emmaus, sweeping away of all the clouds of our uncertainty – though it was necessary that He rebuke them for their slowness of their heart [LK 24.25]. The eyes of their hearts Christ did enlighten, such that they who had been lukewarm in belief were made to burn in faith as the Lord unfolded the Scriptures. In the breaking of bread also their eyes are opened as they eat with Him [LK 24.30-31]. Far more blessed is the opening of the eyes of those to whom the glorification of their nature is revealed, than that of our first parents on whom fell the disastrous consequences of their transgression.

In order that what was passing through the disciples' hearts might not be their fixed opinion, our gracious Lord appeared to them on many occasions. For the disciples were harassed by bewildering thoughts. Even when the Lord had appeared in their midst and said, *Peace be unto you* [LK 24.36], they thought they saw a spirit not flesh. Therefore, the risen Christ must refute their thoughts so discordant with the Truth. He offers to the doubters' eyes the marks of the Cross that remained in His hands and feet. He even invites them to handle Him with careful scrutiny – for the traces of the nails

and spear had been retained to heal the wounds of unbelieving hearts. By such miracles the Savior insured that not with wavering faith, but with most steadfast knowledge, they might comprehend that the very Nature that had been laid in the tomb was to sit on God the Father's throne.

Accordingly, dear saints, throughout the time that elapsed between the Lord's *Resurrection* and *Ascension*, God's Providence had this in view: namely, to teach and impress upon both the eyes and hearts of His own that the Lord Jesus Christ might be acknowledged truly to have risen, just as He truly was born, suffered, and died. Hence, although the most blessed Apostles and all the disciples had been bewildered at His death on the Cross and backward in believing His *Resurrection*, they were so strengthened by the clearness of the truth that when the Lord entered the heights of heaven, they were not sad, but rather were filled with great joy – as we have heard [LK 24.52]. Truly great and unspeakable was their cause for joy, when in the sight of the holy multitude, above the dignity of all heavenly creatures, the Nature of mankind went up hidden in Christ, passing above the angels' ranks ... rising beyond the archangels' heights. Indeed, Christ's human Nature was lifted up until It was received to sit with the Eternal Father, that It should be associated on the throne with His glory, to Whose Nature It was united ... namely, in the Son. Christ's *Ascension*, then, is **our** uplifting – for in Christ humanity is seated upon the Throne. And the certain hope of the Body is raised to where the glory of Christ the Head has gone before.

Let us exult then, dearly beloved, with worthy joy and delight in thanksgiving to God. For today not only are we confirmed as possessors of Paradise, but also in Christ we have penetrated the heights of heaven, and have gained still greater things through Christ's unspeakable grace than we had lost through the devil's malice. Though we were driven out from the bliss of our first abode because of our sin, we have the assurance of our eternal heavenly abode because of the Righteousness One's *Ascension*. For the Son of God has made us members of Himself and placed us in Himself at the right hand of the Father, with Whom He lives and reigns together with the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end.

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]