

Ascension  
5/29/2022

## A SECOND ADVENT

While we should always pay attention to what Jesus says and even does, we should also pay attention to what he does *not* say and does *not* do. The same holds true for the apostles. It says that, *They returned to Jerusalem with great joy...with great joy.*

That leads to a very simple question...Why? Jesus, in bodily form, had been taken away from them...for good. They've been given a mission...to proclaim the gospel to all the nations...a task for which humanly, they are not particularly well suited. When Jesus was crucified, they lost it. This time when Jesus is taken away from them, they don't lose it. They not only hold it together, they return to Jerusalem with great joy. Why? The answer lies in one word...hope. They returned with great joy because they had hope.

Emily Dickinson described hope as, *the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all.* Among other things, hope means waiting. In some languages, to hope and to wait use the same word. The apostles return and they wait. This is a second advent. The waiting this time isn't for the coming of Christ but for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Their waiting isn't idleness. They continued to rejoice and to pray.

The Ascension is a celebration of hope. Jesus was out of their sight and yet they had hope. The Ascension doesn't mean that Jesus is now retired or on vacation, it means that he continues to be present to us even though we don't see him in bodily form. Jesus is taken from our sight not to abandon us but to be our hope.

That means that we're to be people of hope—always. And because we're to be a people of hope—always, that means that despair is a luxury not given to Christians. Even amidst war, pandemic, grade school shootings and so much more, we're called not to be people of naive optimism but of Christian hope. Because Jesus has risen from the dead, because Jesus has ascended into heaven, because Jesus sends us the Holy Spirit, we are a people of hope.

It says that a cloud received Jesus. Biblically, a cloud refers to the presence of God, the presence of mystery. Jesus departs not to a distant star but into the power and life of God. He does this in a human body. It's as if he creates a space within God for humanity. St. Paul insists that we form the body of Christ with Jesus as our head. That means that because we are so united, even though Jesus ascends he remains present with us, and even though we remain here, we have a place in heaven as well or as our opening prayer said, *where the head has gone in glory, the body is called to follow in hope.*

Jesus remains present but his visible presence has passed into the sacraments. We see him in the Eucharist. We hear him in the scriptures. We touch him in those we meet, particularly the poor and suffering. In one sense his going away allows him to be even more present to us.

The Ascension teaches us hope. It also teaches us vigilance. Christian vigilance doesn't simply mean being on guard. It includes that but goes beyond that. Christian vigilance means being open to the good, to truth, to God even amidst what can seem to be a meaningless and even evil world. To be vigilant is to have hearts that are awake, that are in tune with God and ready to receive Jesus, whether that be with him returning on a cloud or in the person sitting next to you. It means living lives of intentional faith in every little way.

Because of our hope and perhaps because of our vigilance, we can learn to be a people of joy. Joy doesn't necessarily mean being giddy. Some people have personalities that are more effusive and others not. Christian joy means that we know Christ is both in heaven with a place for us but also present with us in the midst of our struggles. Even in our struggles, because of Christ, we can be a people of hope and even a people of joy. May that little bird of hope sing within our hearts and never stop at all.

There's an interesting feature of Luke's account of the Ascension. Jesus departed while blessing them. Even his departure was an act of blessing. Pope Benedict once wrote that the blessing hands of Christ are both like a roof that protects us but also a gesture of tearing open the world so that heaven may be present to it. Knowing that Jesus both protects us and opens the world to his grace allows us to be vigilant people, a people of hope, a people of joy.