

The Ascension of our Lord “Thursday or Sunday?”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Every year, pastors in many dioceses get asked the same question: “Father, is Ascension celebrated on Thursday or next Sunday?” The reason why we are asked this question is because, traditionally, the Ascension is celebrated on a Thursday. Why Thursday? This is because Luke tells us in the Acts the Apostles that the Ascension happened forty days after the resurrection. Forty days after Easter lands this celebration on a Thursday. Many dioceses, however, celebrate the Ascension on the 7th Sunday of Easter given how many people work on Thursdays. Celebrating the Ascension on a Sunday allows more parishioners the opportunity to reflect on the importance of the Ascension in our faith tradition. So, there you have it. Aren’t you glad you came to Church this weekend to learn about that?

However, I am going to let you in on a little secret regarding the timing of the Ascension and it is right here on full display in our readings for the Ascension. You see, the readings today actually give us two different accounts of the Ascension from the very same author. And St. Luke seems to contradict himself. In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostle, like I said earlier, Luke dates the Ascension forty days after the Resurrection. In the Gospel reading, however, if you read the end of the Gospel carefully, Luke dates the Ascension on Easter day itself. This seems very confusing. Luke is the same author of both the Gospel and Acts. What are we to make of this?

It seems to me that Luke is suggesting that when it comes to the importance of Christ’s Ascension, to focus on the actual date and time of the Ascension really misses the point. Rather, Luke is challenging us to understand the mystery of the Ascension of Jesus from two different viewpoints that are both very helpful to us in our spiritual journeys. You see, the story in the Gospel wants us to see the Ascension of Jesus in terms of the culmination of his earthly ministry for the sake of our salvation. The story from Acts, on the other hand, looks more to the future here on earth and sees the Ascension of the Lord as necessary for the beginning of the Church and her pilgrimage through time anticipating the second coming of Christ. I am going to talk about both of these viewpoints and share why these viewpoints matter.

Let’s begin with the Gospel reading. For Luke’s Gospel, the Ascension of Jesus is inseparable from the incarnation and the resurrection. On Christmas morning, we celebrated the Son of God becoming born into this world in the flesh. Let me say that again, in the flesh. On Easter morning, we celebrated Jesus’ resurrection from the dead in the flesh. People tend to forget that the tomb was empty. Jesus did not rise from the dead as a ghost, but with his human fleshy, glorified body intact. For Luke, the incarnation and Jesus’ resurrection are both glorious and scandalizing affirmations of the goodness of the human body. It is scandalizing because our culture, like so many cultures, places a dualism on the human person that somehow the body is worthless somehow and only the soul matters.

The doctrines of the incarnation, resurrection and the ascension proclaim: there is an essential unity to body and soul that makes the human body holy ground, and this has many implications on how we view our own bodies, use our bodies, how we reverence the very body we are born with, and come to peace with that. It has implications on how we value other people's bodies too for that matter, regardless of where someone is born, what color they are, male or female, or whether they are rich or poor, popular or marginalized. How we reverence the body after death is also very important. Each human body in creation is made in the image and likeness of God and should be treated as such. Why? Our human nature, all of it, was redeemed by Jesus and ascended with Jesus into the very life of God body and soul This is very good news! This gives us profound hope in our future.

But the evangelist doesn't want us to stop there, as if we didn't already have enough to chew on. Luke wants us to also see the Ascension from another standpoint, the viewpoint offered by the Acts of the Apostles. After Jesus ascends into heaven, two angels appear who say, "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." What are we to make of this peculiar message? Ask yourself! Has Jesus recreated humanity in his image in the incarnation? Yes! Has Jesus lifted up our redeemed nature, opening the doors to heaven to those who follow him? Yes! Now what? The command is, move! What are we supposed to do now? Get Moving!

Share this Good News with others! What this means is, the most important symbol anyone can offer you in the Church after Mass is the exit sign. Honestly. After the Ascension, we are not to sit around navel gazing. We Catholics do too much navel gazing. We must move and share the love of Jesus. Share the love of Jesus to your family! Share the love of Jesus in your workplace or school playground! Share the love of Jesus from the rooftops! Share the love of Jesus to the marginalized and those who live on the periphery. Share the love of Jesus to that person you see in the mirror every morning. Yeah, that person too! We can be so cruel to ourselves when all Jesus wants to do is love you and love you to the best you.

My friends, this weekend we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord. St. Luke gives us a couple perspectives to consider. In light of the incarnation, resurrection and ascension of our Lord, we are called to celebrate and respect the goodness of having a human body. We are invited to examine the precious gift of life that God has so graciously given to us and to celebrate the hope for salvation Christ offers us. We are also invited to examine the way in which we can now move in our lives so to share the love of Jesus with others, with our families, with our coworkers or classmates, and ourselves. Clearly, we have established why the actual date of the Ascension is not as important as the meaning of the feast day itself. What this feast day tells us today and every day: no matter what struggle or hardship we experience in this life, with all of our aches and pains, Jesus gives us hope that we can enjoy eternal life with him someday, body and soul. This is Good News that should fill our hearts with joy and be shared to everyone we meet.