

The Feast of the Ascension, One of the Most Challenging and Difficult Things God Has Revealed to Us

In the first book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While meeting with them, he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for “the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

When they had gathered together they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, “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 as you have seen him going into heaven.” Acts 1:1-:11

Three Stages of the Relationship Between the Physical and Spiritual in Jesus Christ Himself

1st Stage-Ordinary Human Physical Reality

Jesus Was Conceived

Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. Luke 1:30-:31

He was born

And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of

David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. ³ She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:4-:7

He grew up

They (Mary and Joseph) returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. Luke 2:39-:40

He showed normal human emotions

When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became perturbed and deeply troubled, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Sir, come and see." And Jesus wept. John 11:33-:35

He ate

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, ¹⁶ and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins. Matthew 26:26-:28

He slept

A violent squall came up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up. Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Quiet! Be still!" The wind ceased and there was great calm. Then he asked them, "Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?" Mark 4:37-:40

This last passage shows that he also performed miracles, but performing miracles doesn't mean someone isn't truly human.

Peter said, "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, (rise and) walk." Then Peter took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles grew strong. Acts 3:6-:7

We are united with Jesus in the first stage of his physical reality. He experienced ordinary, everyday human life as we do

2nd Stage-Death

Jesus Died

And about three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Some of the bystanders who heard it said, "This one is calling for Elijah. Immediately one of them ran to get a sponge; he soaked it in wine, and putting it on a reed, gave it to him to drink. But the rest said, "Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to save him." But Jesus cried out again in a loud voice, and gave up his spirit. Matthew 27:46-:50

Jesus Was Buried

Now there was a virtuous and righteous man named Joseph who, though he was a member of the council, had not consented to their plan of action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea and was awaiting the kingdom of God. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. After he had taken the body down, he wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb in which no one had yet been buried. It was the day of preparation, and the sabbath was about to begin. The women who had come from Galilee with him followed behind, and when they had seen the tomb and the way in which his body was laid in it, they returned and prepared spices and perfumed oils. Then they rested on the sabbath according to the commandment. Luke 23:50-:56

Jesus's soul was separated from his body

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. 1 Peter 3:18-20

This is a difficult and mysterious passage in a number of ways but it affirms for us that Christ's soul was active while his lifeless body was in the tomb.

Our bodies can be lifeless, but our souls are alive, for better:

Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, "Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied to him, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Luke 23:39-:43

Or for worse:

The rich man also died and was buried, and from the netherworld, ¹⁴ where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he cried out, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.' Abraham replied, 'My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. Luke 16:22-:25

One day we will follow Jesus in experiencing death. Our souls will be separated from our bodies we will be as dead as lifeless as Jesus was when he was laid the tomb.

Go to this section of the Sts. Peter and Paul parish website

<http://www.sspeterandpaul.net/evangelization.htm>

And read the article entitled **“Were the first Christians delusional when they said Jesus had risen from the dead?”** to read some more thoughts on the reality of Christ’s death.

3rd Stage-Reunion of Body and Soul in Glorified Resurrection Body

Christ didn’t stay dead

But at daybreak on the first day of the week they took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb; but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were puzzling over this, behold, two men in dazzling garments appeared to them. They were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground. They said to them, "Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has been raised. Remember what he said to you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day." Luke 24:1-:7

When he rose he had a real physical body, he was not a ghost or a disembodied spirit.

But they were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. Then he said to them, "Why are you troubled? And why do questions arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have." Luke 24:37-:39

So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." John 20:25-:27

But it was not an ordinary physical body. Jesus could appear and disappear from sight instantly.

And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. Luke 24:30-:31

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." John 20:19

We will one day follow Jesus in having our body and soul reunified and existing forever with a glorified physical body. The final two lines of the Nicene Creed, which we say at every Sunday mass, are "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." This reference to the resurrection of the dead isn't referring to Christ. The Creed takes care of that earlier when we say "On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the scriptures." And the reference to "the life of the world to come" doesn't just refer to Heaven as it is now a place where souls are separated from their bodies but united to God but to the new creation that will come into being at the end of the world as we know it, when those united to God will be reunited with their bodies, glorified bodies like the one Christ has possessed since his resurrection.

We will all rise from the dead

Do not be amazed at this, because the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation. John 5:28-:29

The bodies we have when we rise from the dead will be very different from the ones we have now. Just as the body Jesus has now is different than the one he had before his crucifixion

Not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for human beings, another kind of flesh for animals, another kind of flesh for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the brightness of the heavenly is one kind and that of the earthly another. The brightness of the sun is one kind, the brightness of the moon another, and the brightness of the stars another. For star

differs from star in brightness. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible. It is sown dishonorable; it is raised glorious. It is sown weak; it is raised powerful. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual one. 1 Corinthians 15:39-:44

The Correct Way to Understand the Ascension

And it's only when we see Christ's Ascension as part of this teaching about Christ's resurrection and our own resurrection that we can understand the Feast we are celebrating today. The Ascension isn't about Jesus rising into the sky like someone with a jet pack on until he rises so high that we can't see him anymore.¹

What happened at the Ascension is this. During the period following his resurrection Jesus at times chose to reveal himself to his disciples by appearing in his glorified body.

At other times he would suddenly and instantly withdraw himself from their presence in a way that is only possible for someone whose physical body had been transformed in ways that we can not yet fully understand.

This is what occurred at the Ascension. Jesus didn't disappear into outer space. He didn't cease to have a physical body. At the Ascension Jesus withdrew from being physically present to his disciples in such a way that after the Ascension they could no longer see him, speak to him, and so on.

During this time of withdrawal we wait for what is promised to us in the Creed that Jesus "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."The Ascension marks the beginning of one age in Church history. A period when we wait for the return of the physically glorified Christ.

When that day comes and we receive transformed bodies may we do so united in Christ as we rise to the resurrection of life.

Some More Thoughts on This Difficult Teaching

- If we think of the after life as being only disembodied souls in Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory our view is incomplete. This is the current reality for the dead, but at the final resurrection this will change.
- This is such a difficult thing to understand because we do not have a precise vocabulary for describing what a resurrected body is. The writers of scripture only described what they saw, they did not give his a detailed analysis and explanation. Things are made more difficult by the fact that there was no example before Jesus of a resurrected body, and no one has encountered one since.

¹ This is not intended to deny that the bible provides us with an accurate description of what the Ascension looked like to those who witnessed it. Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells us that "When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight." (Acts 1:9) I firmly believe in the reliability of this account. But we need to understand that more was going on than just Jesus rising above the earth. It's not as if someone in a helicopter on the other side of the cloud would have been able to see Jesus, "Oh look, I see where he's hiding!" Jesus did rise up from the earth, but there were also much more powerful and mysterious things that Jesus was doing in his resurrected body at this time.

A Little More Help, Maybe

My homily on the Feast of the Ascension, which can be found at:

<http://www.sspeterandpaul.net/Homily.htm>

Should hopefully provide a more concise summary of the material we discussed tonight. If you want some to try to understand this material a little bit better it might be helpful to read it through.