

The Ascension of our Lord “Thursday or Sunday”

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Every year, pastors in a number of 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. A number of 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, Luke dates the Ascension forty days after the Resurrection. In the Gospel reading, however, 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, passion, death and resurrection. You see, it is good to remember that Luke was not writing in isolation from the other texts of Sacred Scripture. To understand the Gospel of Luke, you need start at the beginning with the creation of the world, the creation of Adam and Eve our first parents, and the original sin that distorted our original human form and brought sin and death into the world. In the incarnation, so beautifully told by Luke, our Creator himself becomes fully human as the son of God and the son of Mary to be our divine physician, to heal our wounded nature from the inside out, and to recreate humanity back into his image again. Like a doctor who has to touch a patient’s wound so to heal that person’s damaged nature, God himself has become our heavenly physician and entered into humanity’s wound of sin and death itself. The omnipotent God in the person of Jesus Christ becomes the paschal lamb who

takes away the sins of the world. But the story doesn't end with Jesus' death on the cross, does it? Rather, as the Apostle's Creed confesses, Jesus descended into hell itself. So if we are falling from the Father to hell itself, who is there to catch us now except the Father's Son? How is this possible except through the Holy Spirit? As I have said on many occasions, the Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord reveals a conspiracy of love of a Triune God that wants to save all.

On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. Not as a ghost, not as a specter! Jesus rose with our humanity intact. This is so very important for St. Luke! The physician has healed the wounds of sin and death. Our human nature itself was raised from the dead with Jesus on that third day. The incarnation, resurrection and the ascension are therefore events in human history that radically proclaim the goodness of the human body. This is why when we look at ourselves in the mirror; we should respect what we see. The doctrines of the incarnation, resurrection and the ascension proclaim: the human body is holy ground and this has many implications on how we use our bodies, how we view our bodies, and how we treat our bodies or other people's bodies for that matter. The human body is holy ground. Our human nature ascended with Jesus into the very life of God. This is very good news!

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? Yes! Has Jesus lifted up our redeemed nature, opening the doors to heaven to those who follow the light of the Gospel? Yes! Now what? The command is, move! What are we supposed to do now? Get Moving! Share this Good News with others! As I have mentioned more than once before, the most important symbol anyone can offer you in the Church after Mass this morning (evening) is the exit sign. Honestly. After the Ascension, we are not to sit around navel gazing. We are to 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 that person you see in the mirror every morning. Yeah, that person too!

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 Jesus offers us. We are 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, Jesus gives us the grace to ascend!