“He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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Ascension

St. Mary’s Cathedral, Fargo

Every Sunday and holy day in the life of the Church, we proclaim these words together in the Creed: “He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” And today, six weeks after celebrating the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, we celebrate the completion of that very event—the Ascension of our Lord into heaven.

We can really understand the place of the Ascension only if we see it in relationship to the other great events in the life of Jesus. Jesus was born as one of us so that he could enter into the human situation as our Savior. He came into this world with a human nature to rescue us from our twin enemies, from sin and eternal death. By his sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus won the victory over sin and death, and that victory was manifested in his resurrection. Jesus made the passage through the darkness of death, and he emerged triumphant in the light of his resurrection.

But Jesus did not rise on Easter Sunday merely to take up the same earthly existence that he had begun at the moment of his incarnation. The ascension shows us that he rose from the dead to a new life, a heavenly life. His ascension was his return to the Father, his glorification in heaven at God’s right hand. He is exalted now as the Lord of Life. In fact, the ascension is of one piece with the resurrection itself. It shows the complete newness and fullness of the risen life of Jesus, and we really cannot imagine yet what that new life is like. But again and again, in the Scriptures and in the Mass, we hear that Jesus ascended to a life of glory. And what is that glory? It is to be in the heavenly dwelling of his Father, to share once again in the glory that was his from the beginning.

There are several important lessons of faith to be found in this solemn celebration. One, obviously, is that there is another life, a higher life, to which we also are called. And Jesus Christ is the only way to it, the only way. The Ascension teaches us that the way to heaven means accepting Christ’s word, following Christ’s commandments, living as he taught us to live. The Ascension of Jesus shows us our true goal in life: to rise with Christ through the power of his Resurrection. Jesus promised his disciples, “I am going to prepare a place for you,” and that is our hope, that we too are called to be with him, to live with him in the eternity of heaven.

Life is precious to all of us. We cling to life in this world with all of its sorrow, all its pain, and with all the frustration that is part of our human existence. We cling to this life because it’s the only life we know, and we know that life is a gift. And yet, we really don’t want this kind of life forever, do we. We yearn for the perfect life that will never end, the life of glory. Explorers and scientists have looked throughout history, even today, for the fountain of youth, that secret source that will prolong life and prevent death itself. But the life we are made for is not found in this world, but in heaven, and to find it, we must pass with Christ through death to a sharing in his resurrection and ascension.
Another essential lesson of this event is that we have been given a mission. In Acts, we hear Jesus say, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And in today’s Gospel, we hear Jesus tell those same apostles, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations…” But Jesus wasn’t speaking only to that handful of men; he was also speaking to us. We are to be his witnesses, the ones who manifest to the world who Jesus is, and why we believe in him. Christianity is not simply standing around, looking up to the heavens. It means bringing the light and love of Christ to the nations, by our example, by our words, our deeds, and our prayers. Jesus sends us, just as he sent the apostles, to make him known and to bring others with us to the glory that our Lord has prepared for us.

Luke tells us that after he was taken up to heaven the apostles were filled with joy. We might think that they would have been sad, but no, they were joyful. Jesus had promised them he would be with them always, and they were filled with confidence to go and carry out his commands. We can have that same confidence, knowing that Jesus dwells now in heaven but remains with us in his Church. As we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, as we receive him in Holy Communion, we know that we are receiving the One who is with the Father, and we are made one with him.

Brothers and sisters, we have been called to a great hope in Christ. In him our frail human nature has been raised to glory; our humanity dwells now in heaven united for all eternity with the glory of God’s divinity. And we know by faith, by our Lord’s own promise, that one day his glory will be ours if we choose to accept it. We don’t really need to fear the physical aging that will lead to death; we only need to fear the power of sin. That alone can disrupt and destroy us, and rob us of the glory that Christ has prepared for us. So today, as we look with the apostles toward heaven, toward Jesus in glory at the right hand of the Father, we know that he will come again to raise us up, so that we might share in the fullness of life, the life of glory in his presence.