

The Grace of His Disappearance

- Ascension
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I would like to call my homily today, “The Grace of His Disappearance”. Today we celebrate the “Ascension of the Lord”, the event 40 days after the Resurrection, which means after a significant period of time, when Jesus “was lifted up and a cloud took him from their sight”.

What’s important to say

is this is not the feast of the departure of Jesus, but rather the feast of his disappearance. It’s about the fact that we no longer see him as he was seen by those who walked with him in Galilee and Judea, but that he has nevertheless not departed. In fact, he disappeared in Jerusalem so that he might not depart but that he might be able to be present everywhere to all people of all times, even to us. If this were the feast of his departure from us, it would not be something to be festive about. If it is the feast of his disappearance from one place, one time, one group of disciples so that he could be present—though invisible—even to us, then it is reason for a great feast, a real festival. Disappearance not departure: that’s the first point of my homily called “The Grace of His Disappearance”.

Have you ever wondered what Jesus was doing all that time during those 40 days, which means simply “a good stretch of time” from Rising to Disappearance. We’ve got a cluster of appearances around the first Easter and the week or so after, and then nothing. He had walked daily with them before his death and he had daily taught them openly and it got recorded or reflected on in the gospels. Then this blank. All we have about this period is what we read today:

“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... to wait for the promise of the Father... the Holy Spirit.”

I like to think of this period like a Quarter in our academic year and to think of this as the capstone course for their core curriculum of the recorded gospel. It is so private, non-public, not open to all (e.g., not to the people of the villages or the elders of the people to whom he did not appear) that you might even call it a capstone course which was carried out as an independent study with only these close men and women disciples. All we learn is the syllabus of these forty days: 1) proof that he was alive and that it was he himself, 2) an advanced teaching on the kingdom of God, and 3) the Holy Spirit as his and the Father’s promise. That’s a great syllabus. Wish I had been able to take it! Why did the disciples not write about it or give us their class notes? It can only be for two reasons: 1) that we already had the core in the gospels and didn’t need anything more; and 2) perhaps, more importantly, they so understood his teaching about the promise of the Holy Spirit that they knew we did not need to be told but would get the teaching better from the Holy Spirit herself, who would teach us far more truly than they could. So perhaps we have not missed anything in this 40-day capstone course.

Then the time came for him to disappear, if he were to be able to be present everywhere, even to us. Why do I call this “The Grace of His Disappearance”? I do so because what we call “grace” is the way of his presence to us. He comes to us in a real, godly, or supernatural way which truly touches us. The real Christ touching the real me is what we call divine grace. It needs the Holy Spirit to get to us, it needs our faith, and at times faith may break out into something like experience, it needs us to be truly there as the real Jesus is there. That’s grace... and that’s why I call the Ascension, “The Grace of His Disappearance”.

Let me tell you a story, another one of those true Jesuit stories? A week ago Friday I met with a man in my office for an hour and a half, a man who is the CEO of a Catholic institution. He was referred to me by a couple of Jesuits who are spiritual masters, saying I was what this man needed. Usually that means “We’ve got a tough, businesslike guy who can’t get out of his head... so he’s just right for you, Fr. heady president! See what you can do with him because our spiritual, mystical, directly spiritual way does not cut it with him.” Let me call him “Peter”, because when I ask him where in the gospel he would locate himself, he says “Peter” because like Peter he feels confused, blundering, doubting, denying, not trusting, with always much to learn. I’ve been conversing with Peter for about a year and a half. I love meeting with him, two CEOs who can talk turkey and indulge our thinking straight about things on a late Friday afternoon after we’ve both taken care of the business of the week.

This Friday we were at about an hour and a quarter into it, having talked about how to make our institutions more genuinely Catholic and how to deal with traditional Catholics who doubt our organizations being truly Catholic. I said something to the effect that you have to be free, grounded, at home, confident in your own faith in order not to be threatened or defensive under attack. He said that was the problem because he was confused in his faith—i.e., in what he believed, and was only on his way in trying to figure things out. He added I have only one thing I am fully convicted about “God loves me unconditionally and God loves this person who is attacking me unconditionally!” “Well, Peter”, I said, “that is your faith; where do you think that came from other than from God? The home or core or grounding of your faith from which you can be free is your firm conviction, your knowing that you and others are loved unconditionally by God. There is ‘The Grace of His Disappearance’ in the promise of the father.”

I didn’t know what I had done. Didn’t know I had pierced the intellectual armor of this Catholic CEO. I was thinking, “Boy, that’s about enough for today, let’s schedule the next appointment.” I’m beginning to think now only of wrapping this up and of that Friday evening bourbon and seven back at Arrupe. But he was not quite done. He quieted down and told me that for years he had been praying to walk with Jesus, till one day Jesus said to him, “How about instead if you walk with me?” Peter started tearing up and apologized to this CEO for that CEO tearing up, because we CEOs are not supposed to do that. There was faith showing itself in something like experience. I told him this was what I call a “breakthrough grace” and that we only get about five in a lifetime and should keep going back to them to get all that God has given to us in the breakthrough grace. This was clearly “The Grace of His Disappearance” of the Ascension.

But still he was not done. He then told me he more recently found himself judging people who stood at corners with cardboard signs begging. Then one day he said, what the hell, opened his window and gave a man a buck. In an off-hand way he said to the man at the corner, “God bless

you!” The man replied, “He just did!!!” Nice going Jesus. Suddenly Peter experienced that is how it all works. Again Peter apologized to me for tearing up yet again. Another breakthrough grace to a man open to it because of deep and real faith. Again the ascended Lord’s “Grace of His Disappearance”.

It was at last time for us to quit. That meeting ended with me for the first time giving him a big hug, CEO to CEO. It was the only proper way to mark the moment for which he said he was so thankful and grateful to me because he said he found this kind of thing very hard to talk about. I too was moved by my own “Grace of His Disappearance”. There needed to be a hug to mark the moment for both heady CEOs.

Thank you, Jesus, for the promise of the Spirit and for disappearing from Jerusalem.