

ASCENSION

One of my sisters teaches sixth grade at a nearby Catholic school. She invited me to her class yesterday to talk about the Ascension and Pentecost. She said, “Explain what we believe about Jesus’ body. Is his body in heaven?” I was thinking, “To sixth graders! I know students of advanced theology who cannot wrap their heads around that.” So I met this great group of kids and reminded them what we read about Jesus after the resurrection. He had a physical body that Thomas could touch and that swallowed food, but we also read he could appear and disappear, even when doors were locked. The Church says Jesus had a “glorified body” after the resurrection, which is what ascended into heaven.

The human body is remarkable even before it is glorified. We possess extraordinary physical, mental and emotional abilities. When my elderly great-uncle Father Joe was entering his last years, he lost many of those abilities. Whenever we asked him in all sincerity, “How are you doing?” he answered with his wry sense of humor, “Losing altitude.”

All human bodies have been at risk of a pandemic run wild around the world. As remarkable as our bodies are, they are also fragile. A year ago we fervently prayed for God to intervene and stop the virus. It appears we are now receiving an answer to our prayers. It may seem that God has been slow, but the development of the vaccine was speedy, and its impact has made our country a safer place. We are also safer because during this year, many of you accepted inconveniences that slowed the spread. We have done our part, and God has done his. Such marvels are due not only to science, but to the human ingenuity that God placed within us from the moment of creation.

According to Mark’s account of the ascension, Jesus went up, and the disciples went out. Jesus’ glorified body was taken up into the heavens, and the disciples took their physical bodies into the whole world to proclaim the gospel to every creature. The virus went into the whole world and proclaimed frailty to every creature, but we use the same pandemic to proclaim a wider message of hope. Jesus promised that signs would accompany those who believe: deadly things would not harm them, and the sick would recover. We lost many dear people this year, but their deaths drove the urgency to prevent others from a similar fate.

One aspect of Jesus’ glorified body that even sixth graders show learn, is that in the resurrection a human body was glorified, and in the ascension, that human body took “a seat at the right hand of God,” as St. Mark describes it. A human body, a glorified version of the one you and I inhabit, has already entered heaven. As you’ll hear in the preface today, Christ “ascended, not to distance himself from our lowly state but that we, his members, might be confident of following where he, our Head and Founder, has gone before.” We are the body of Christ, he is the head, and our glorified body we pray will one day rejoin its head. As the pandemic loosens its grip, let us acknowledge it as one of the accompanying signs that the Lord works with those who proclaim the gospel to every creature. Let us thank God for this wonder and tell others of his glory. Then, at the end of our days, when our earthly body loses altitude, our glorified body may gain altitude in the ascension of Jesus Christ.

Sunday, May 16, 2021