

Feast of the Ascension

Father David I. Giffen

I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

“If you love something set it free. If it comes back to you, it's yours. If it doesn't, it never was.”

Jesus has risen – he has appeared to the woman at the tomb, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, to Thomas by his wounds and to the others in the breaking of the bread. He has again preached, proclaimed and healed sick – living amongst them again – but before his followers have the chance to catch their breath, their Lord and Saviour – their Shepherd and friend – is up and is gone again.

It has only been but weeks since he had first been taken from them. Just over a month since they had found themselves desolate in their despair. And the Resurrection – it *had* changed everything – it had made new and it had renewed again. So why was He now leaving them, why he was going away – after all it had taken for Jesus to return to them – why would he now leave them behind again?

Abandoned they felt – alone in the world – having persevered so far in their faith. But again they were left without a Shepherd to lead their flock – lost and unsure of the way.

As many of you are aware, I was not born in Canada, but in a little town just outside of Glasgow, Scotland, called Bishopbriggs. Having been the first born grandchild to my grandparents, Eddie and Margaret, my birth, a little over thirty years ago, brought great joy to my young Scottish family.

Years later, while visiting Scotland as an adult, my Grandmother sat me down to share with me, what she described as one of the saddest days of her life.

She began by telling me what it was like to be a young Grandmother to this fiery red-headed child. She told me that during the first two years of my life, when I would be dropped off to play – I would immediately get my hands into everything I could find.

In her thick Scottish accent, she told me that I had “wee grubby hands!”

She told me how I would go around touching everything, and that I had a tendency to leave quite the mess in my wake. But although it drove her a little bit crazy – like all grandmothers – she told me that she couldn't help but love me anyways.

She recalled that when I was almost two years of age, my Dad was offered a new job in Toronto, and my family began the process of immigrating overseas. She told me how she had never been more heartbroken. That in a world with no FaceBook and in a world with no Skype – where a world away *really* was a world away – this departure felt like it would leave a gaping void in her life. The hopes of watching her first grandson grow up before her eyes were no longer going to be what she thought they would be – and the way forward – well it was really hard to see.

On the day that my family left Scotland for our new world – my Granma told me about how she looked down at the glass table in her family room, and with tears in her eyes, she was reminded again of what could have, and might have been. As she looked at the table and saw the grubby little fingerprints of a two year old child – she couldn't help but start to cry.

Today, the Church begins its long walk through time – from the ascendancy of our Lord to the birth and life of the Church. We know that the fear, uncertainty and anxiety of the Eleven Disciples who experienced Christ's death, resurrection and departure will soon be replaced by a sense of joy, hope and wonder – but today – they are still in between.

Like many of us who have suffered from feelings of abandonment, there is an overwhelming desire for things to go back to the way they were. There is a wish that things can change, and a grasping for things to return, and often we just get stuck in the mud and cease to move in any direction at all.

For some this might be caused by the death of a loved one, and for others the divorce from a spouse; it might even come at the loss of pet or a close neighbour who has moved on from the neighbouring house. It doesn't take much to get lost in our shattered expectations, and it is easy to lose our hope and our way – and sometimes we stop moving forward, sometimes we find ourselves in a perpetual state of waiting.

Taken aback by what they had just seen, and recognizing that Jesus was now gone – scripture tells that the eyes of the disciples were locked upon the sky.

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

In a single voice, the message that we hear points in two very distinct directions: there is a directive not to stand around idle looking heavenward and into space, but at the same time, we are told to expect Jesus to return to us, to expect promises fulfilled again. In the angelic words from above, we have been given both a sense

of mission, which has been passed on to us, and a sense of remembering a promise, that is coming to us.

This past Saturday marked the anniversary of the day that I was ordained a Priest – a day, which like most celebrations, brought joy for my friends and family alike. But one of the greatest joys for me personally on that special day in my life was the presence of my grandparents, who had travelled especially from Scotland to be here.

Graced and humbled – in an action that could only come from God – I was able to give these two special people in my life, the first of my priestly blessings. As I stood in front of my grandmother and my grandfather that night, as I laid my hands upon each of their heads – I realized that the same grubby hands that had left the memories on their family room table so many years ago – were now uniting us in Christ.

We had not always had the opportunity to be present in each other's lives, at least not to the degree that we might have hoped, but they had always worked incredibly hard, to make sure that I knew that I was always loved. I realized in those touching moments that night, that my Grandmother's story did not end on that dark and dreary day in her life – for God would have much more in store for us – we just had to wait for His promises to come to be.

Today, we are reminded how we must not only live in the Season of the Resurrection, but as we wait for the filling of the Spirit at Pentecost, we must first live through the feelings of loss and abandonment of the Ascension. We must trust that God is indeed leading the way – that his promises will be fulfilled. We must let go of the futures that we have conjured up in our own heads – and stop planning for the ways we *think* things should be. For in the wake of

the Ascension, as we wait for what is next, Christ calls us to listen for where *God* is calling us to be.

We should not make the mistake today of commemorating Christ's physical departure from us, but we should instead begin our celebration of his eternal presence in us. For the Ascension of the Lord is not just a moment in time – just as we continue to live in the resurrection – but the Ascension of the Lord is a continual commissioning, to the ends of the earth and to all people.

“YOU are my witnesses” Jesus says – and through the Ascension of the Lord, by the Spirit that will come, our God in Christ ascends to new life – a life that cannot die, and a flame that cannot be put out – He lives eternally through you and me.

Thanks be to God.