

Pastoral Reflection

Ascension

Acts 1:1-11; Eph 1:17-23; Mt 28:16-20

After the resurrection, Matthew tells us, “the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them. When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.”

The words above, “they doubted,” coincidentally, gives me some hope that I am not a total defector of the faith. I mean I am not the most faithful Christian. For me the saying, “The spirit is willing, the flesh is weak,” is probably an understatement. Sometimes I feel my faith is so weak it’s hanging on by a thread. So different from the early years after a strong conversion experience when I felt propelled by God’s Spirit to be an evangelical Christian, disciplined and devoted. That’s when the Holy Spirit “fell” on me. And now?

The disciples lived alongside Jesus for over 3 years. At this point (the day of the Ascension) they’d witnessed, for 40 days, the aftermath of his resurrection. The beginning of Acts says: “He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them for forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”

Yet they continued to doubt.

That says it all for me. We live in a pluralistic world where few adhere to the core elements of our Christian beliefs. As Americans we are enculturated and spoiled (most of us). It’s hard to believe in a faith that invites us to give up everything, like the early disciples, in order to follow Jesus. Luke 18:24: "Sell everything you have and give to the poor.... Then come, follow me." Now this is such a difficult teaching. After all, we live in an “instant fix” culture that can send us anything, at any time, via Amazon... not even basic needs, but primarily wants.

But the source of the disciples’ doubts was something more than a distraction from faith. It was the real thing, doubt, in response to Jesus’ fundamental question, “Who do you say that I am?” In other words, do we believe or do we not. Is Jesus the promised one, the Messiah, the Son of God, and God’s very self? Or not? Even though we often don’t believe on a feeling level, since so few around us believe, we must hold on to the thread, even if it’s purely a thread of remembrance. Maybe, at this time, it’s just a wish for faith. Well, don’t let go of that thread! It will lead you back to where you once were. Just as Jesus promised those early disciples, He promised us.

Pentecost made all the difference for those first disciples, when they were baptized in the Holy Spirit. When that happens our doubt-filled flesh, as on the day of the Ascension with the first disciples, will give in to a much greater power, as long as we are willing to accept it. Before Jesus ascended he told his disciples, “wait for the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Now it is our turn. Be baptized in the Holy Spirit... Accept this awesome gift, be faithful to follow her beckoning, then leave the rest up to God.

—Cathy Hartrich