

Reflection on the Gospel- Feast of the Ascension Year A
(Acts 1:1-11; Matthew 28:16-20)

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Loss is an integral part of the human experience, and death is generally the most painful experience of loss. Today's Feast of the Ascension invites us to face the experience of loss in a transformative way. In Ordinary Time, we celebrate the life and ministry of Jesus. Over the period of Lent and Easter, we have been re-mem-bering his death and resurrection. As we come towards the end of the Easter season, the liturgy draws us into another aspect of the Mystery, that of the presence of the Risen One even in his absence.

While today's gospel recounts Matthew's story of Jesus' final encounter with his disciples, it does not provide an account of Jesus' "ascension" or return to God. For that, we must turn to the first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles. The story presupposes a pre-scientific, three-tiered understanding of the structure of the world. In this ancient view, God is in the heavens above and the prophet Jesus, like the prophet Elijah of old, is caught up into God's presence. The Holy Spirit will "descend" upon God's people and "clothe" them with power to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. The vertical (up and down) movement is balanced by a horizontal movement: Jesus' family and followers who grieve the loss of their loved one are told not to keep looking up to the heavens. They have work to do: strengthened by his blessing, they are to stay in the city for the present and be empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue the prophetic ministry of Jesus, to be witnesses to his death and resurrection. They have to face the fact that the physical loss of Jesus means a new and different sort of presence and that they have a role to play in making him present in their world.

The gospel reading for today has Jesus on a mountain top where he commissions his male disciples to make disciples of all nations. He has already commissioned the women on the open road to announce the good news of the resurrection (Matthew 28:10). They are to be fearless in their mission. In Matthew's final chapter, then, both men and women are commissioned to proclaim the gospel. There are other dimensions to their mission, namely to baptise in the name of the Triune God and to teach what Jesus has taught or "commanded" them. The confidence that they need and that we all need to engage in this mission is the assurance that the risen Jesus is with us to the end of time. The gospel has come full circle. In the first chapter of Matthew, an angel announces that the child to be born will be called Emmanuel, God-with-us. The last verse of the gospel invites us once more to ponder the wonder of that truth.