

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today is the Ascension of our Lord, a festival mired in obscurity. Unlike Christmas and Easter, our chancel today is neither decorated with trees and lights and poinsettias nor filled with the fragrance of lilies and hyacinths and daffodils. People tend not to flock home for family time on the 40th day after Easter (it's a Thursday, after all). There's no gift giving or egg hunting. There are no Ascension Day specials on TV. There are no news stories discussing the Ascension, no scholars trying to debunk this little known, little celebrated festival of the Church.

Surely there is reason to try, for is it any easier to believe that Jesus ascended "*to where he was before*" (Jn 6:62) than it is to believe that He "came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary"? Surely not, and they are inextricably linked. After all, Jesus told Nicodemus, "*No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man*" (Jn 3:13). And as soon as Jesus mentioned such "*heavenly things*" (Jn 3:12) as "*ascending to where he was before,*" "*many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him*" (Jn 6:66).

Therefore, the Church must not forget this Festival or downplay its importance, for this festival is the consummation, remembering all that Jesus did during His sojourn on earth, and this festival is the coupler connecting Christ the Head to His Body the Church.

This Festival looks backward at how we got to this point. Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms all foretold it—God would raise up this Prophet like Moses, this Priest in the order of Melchizekek, this King in the line of David who would reign in an everlasting kingdom. The Old Testament writers foretold that this "*Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.*"

This Festival thinks on how Moses and the Prophets spoke of this day also in types, foretelling Jesus' own ascension in Enoch, who walked with God and was taken to Him (Gen. 5:24), even as Jesus "*parted from them and was carried up into heaven*"; in Aaron, who went into the tabernacle and behind the veil to sprinkle the blood of the sin offering on the mercy seat (Lev. 16:15), the earthly tabernacle but a copy of the heavenly one that Jesus entered by His own blood having offered up the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice (Heb. 9:11-12); in Joshua, Jesus' own namesake, who led the people across the Jordan into the promised land (Joshua 4), prefiguring Jesus leading us out of the wilderness of this vale of tears through the waters of Holy Baptism into our eternal promised land; in Elijah, taken up into heaven in a whirlwind and a fiery chariot, leaving Elisha with a double portion of his spirit, hearkening us to Jesus' departure and the coming of the Holy

Spirit with the sound of a rushing wind and fire from heaven, Jesus leaving us the double portion of His word and Sacraments.

With His commission and blessing, this Festival looks forward to the building of the Church on the Stone rejected—Jesus Christ, through the proclamation of Him crucified, risen, ascended, through the preaching of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus’ name, through bearing witness of Him to the end of the earth, through making disciples by baptizing and teaching (Matt. 28:19-20), and with Jesus’ promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against her (Matt. 16:18), for which we continually worship Christ with joy.

And this Festival looks out to the horizon with hope and yearning for the day when Jesus will return “*in the same way as [His disciples] saw him go into heaven,*” “*in a cloud with power and great glory*” (Luke 21:27), but this time also “*with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God*” (1 Thess. 4:16) that every eye might look up and see Him (Rev. 1:7; Luke 21:27-28). On that day, whether living or dead, we will rejoice, for the day of our redemption will have drawn near. The dead in Christ will rise from the dead and all who look to Him will be caught up to join in procession to His throne, and we will hear the glorious words, “*Come, you Blessed*” (Matt. 25:34).

And this is just part of what the Festival of the Ascension signals. I suppose if the skeptics knew, they would treat it not with disinterest, but with the disdain of the Church’s other Festivals. But it matters not to us. Neither their skepticism nor their disdain of the holy things matters to us. We’ve got good news to share—of Christ crucified, risen, ascended, of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. We’ve been baptized; we get to eat a food that endures to eternal life; we’ve got the Holy Spirit and His power from on high. So, let’s not just stand around in a daze, gazing up in to heaven. Let’s go and bear witness.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.