

Feast of the Ascension
May 22-23, 2009
St. John the Evangelist Parish
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Acts 1: 1-11 Eph 1: 17-23 Mk 16: 15-20

The emotional roller coaster continues today for the disciples of Jesus.

Recall their wild swings of fear, sadness and deep grieving upon the death of the Lord, just six weeks earlier, and what they thought was the death of all their hopes for a new relationship with God and for a new faith-filled community life. And then, on that first Easter night, Jesus appeared to them and their emotions soared. They were jubilant and their joy knew no bounds.

For the past 40 days or so, they had just about gotten accustomed to surprising appearances of Jesus. They had felt powerless and bereft; now they had hope again... each time they heard that someone had seen him they felt uplifted, overjoyed. And here they are, with him again, for what would be the final time.

Jesus promises to them that they will receive power with the coming of the Holy Spirit. And therefore I would like to speak with you about the kind of power that Jesus promised to them and to all who believe.

The disciples must have wondered about it as well. His words were puzzling as they often were: who is this Holy Spirit that he promises? What does he mean by us being witnesses? What kind of power will we receive? They, these unschooled fishermen, tax collectors, people who worked with their hands, who seemed to be so weak compared to the mighty Romans, and also compared with the Jewish leadership who were powerful in a different way, would now have power of their own! But what would it be like?

As they are letting his words sink in, they probably felt a bit confused and disoriented. Then, without warning, Jesus vanishes into a cloud. No good-bye, no last gesture of fellowship, he's just gone!

They look around, stare up into the sky,

not knowing what just happened.
Is he coming back?
Where did he go?
What are they to do now?
Frightened, hesitant to move, confused and shocked,
once again the emotional roller coaster takes over.

Just in time the two men in white garments appear
to focus and calm them.
I imagine that the arrival of these benign strangers
must have helped them to regain their equilibrium,
even as they were beginning to realize that they would not see Jesus again.

It would only be later, when they had time to speak with each other
about what Jesus had said to them,
would they realize that they would not be all alone
in their monumental task of witnessing to the whole world what Jesus had done for
them.
They reminded themselves
that he had said they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit.

They were certainly not accustomed to thinking about themselves as powerful.
Jesus was powerful, but they were just his followers.

Do you and I think of ourselves as powerful?
Certainly, in our society, power is one of the things that people crave.
Some never get enough of it;
many misuse it;
others find power intoxicating and addicting.
That kind of power is attractive because others want to associate themselves
with powerful people.
Political or social power allows a person to do many things,
make others do his/her will;
that kind of power makes someone famous, recognizable on the street.
This kind of power builds and feeds the ego.
Many people would do almost anything to get it.

Is that what Jesus was talking about?
Was the Holy Spirit going to make the disciples
players to be reckoned with,
movers and shakers,
consorts of the rich and famous?

I don't think so.

I'm afraid that Jesus meant, by the word power, something else entirely
from the kind of power that has always been so popular in the world.

The Gospel gives us some clues about what kind of power
the disciples could expect to receive.
Jesus tells them that everyone who is baptized

and who is willing and unafraid to profess their faith will be rewarded with power.
They will be able to do wonderful things
that will be signs for others of the power of the Holy Spirit:
we're told that they will be able to handle snakes without coming to harm,
drink deadly poison and live,
and heal people merely by touching them.
They will have the ability to speak new languages and drive out demons.
And we're told that when they performed these mighty and powerful deeds
their message would be confirmed,
which was the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection.
Having that kind of dramatic ability must have been exciting,
even exhilarating for the disciples.
They knew that the Lord was with them
and that they would never be apart from him again

Now it's tempting for us,
removed as we are from that time
where the disciples were performing wondrous deeds in many places,
to think that kind of power is no longer available today.
We're just living our lives, doing the best we can,
but we haven't handled any deadly snakes lately
or survived a poison pill.

I think, however, that the same power,
the same unbelievable power of the disciples is available to us today.
It's the same Holy Spirit sending that same power to us,
but the form of it may be different,
more suited to our time and culture.
And it's a power very different from the power that the world covets.

Rather than building us up at the expense of everyone else,
the kind of power that the Lord's ascension made possible for us
allows us to work miracles of love,
miracles that build other people up.
This power is about letting mighty God work through us,
about giving the glory to God
and not about getting it for ourselves.
Love, after all, is the most powerful force on earth.
Love allows us to forgive people who have injured us
and maybe even turn them from enemies into friends.
Love permits us to reconcile with family members that we haven't wanted to talk to,
and make our families more whole.
This powerful force strengthens us to be better listeners
and thereby heal people as we strive to understand their pain and suffering.

The power of love teaches us the new language of compassion
which can bridge differences in age, culture, race and religion.
As we learn to speak this language,
the ones we serve may learn it for themselves.
In this way we continue to bring the Gospel of Jesus to all nations.
The power of love gives us the ability to turn sorrow into joy,

desolation into consolation,
agitation and anxiety into peace.

We can help people get off their emotional roller coaster
and experience the peace of the Lord.

That's the power of the Holy Spirit and it's available to each of us.

If we believe that Jesus' promises are true, and they are,
then we can experience his power today and always!