

ASCENSION – YEAR C (2010) HOMILY
(Acts 1:1-11; Hebrews 9:24-28, 10: 19-23; Luke 24: 46-53)

WE WILL BE AT HOME IN HEAVEN BECAUSE JESUS IS ONE OF US

When I went to high school at St. Charles, I knew no one. When I showed up there, it was like first grade all over again. The vast majority of my eighth grade classmates went to the newly opened Watterson and there was only one other boy from my parish who went to St. Charles that year – and I had nothing in common with him and hardly knew him. It was scary. But it did not take long before I made great friends – and those four years of high school were a time of growth and happiness (for the most part). I had a similar experience when I went off to Minnesota to graduate school. In this case, I knew absolutely no one. I got off the train and felt sick. But even more quickly than in high school, I soon made wonderful friends – some of them life-long. In both cases, I was able to find people with whom I had a lot in common. I saw kindred spirits in some of my classmates at St. Charles and in some of those I studied with in Minnesota. This is a common pattern for all of us. When we go to a new place, God blesses us with warm and welcoming souls who make us feel that we belong. It is, of course, important that we as a parish community be welcoming to all who find our doorstep. This is all the more critical since we are a large parish. [This morning, we especially welcome our parishioners the Voinovich, Ryan, and Smith families who have children making First Holy Communion today.]

The Feast of the Ascension gives us the opportunity to reflect on how it will be at the end of our lives when the Lord calls us to our true home in heaven. The readings today remind us that Christ will come again. He was taken up into heaven in what we call the mystery of the Ascension; but in the first reading (from the Acts of the Apostles), the angels asked Jesus' disciples why they were standing there gawking up toward the sky – after all, the angels said, this same Jesus will return one day from on high. In the second reading (from Hebrews), the writer tells us that the Lord will come again a second time for the judgment and he will come then not to take away sin (as he did the first time he appeared) but rather to bring salvation to all who eagerly await him. These passages often evoke for us the scene at the end of the world when Christ will come in power and majesty to judge the living and the dead. Trumpets will sound at this time and all men and women who have ever lived will be summoned before the throne of Jesus the Lamb. This will be what we know as the General Judgment.

But the church also teaches that each of us will have a Particular Judgment where Jesus will come for us when our time on earth is at an end. This time will be an even bigger challenge than when we go away to school or when we move to a new place where we don't know anyone. The time of our death will be the biggest transition of our existence because we will be passing from death to new life – following in the footsteps of the Risen and Ascended Christ whom we celebrate during this Easter Season. This transition will be all the more serious because we know that we have to face our Maker. But our faith tells us not to be afraid because God has promised eternal life to all who in some way have chosen to belong to him. For me, what will make this passage to a new place easier and comforting is that the one who meets us will be one of us. Yes, Jesus is God – but he is also a man (a human being like us). When we enter into eternity, the God who will stare back at us will have a human face. The Feast of the Ascension reminds us

that Christ, the Son of God, returned to the Father with a human body. Someone who looks like us sits at the right hand of God for all eternity. This is the One who will take us by the hand and lead us into eternal life. This experience of meeting God in human form will perhaps have the same feel about it as when we met new friends in a strange place. But the place where we will meet our friend Jesus will feel like home right away because this is where God made us to be forever. And Jesus will be a good friend whom we have known all our earthly lives in the sacraments (especially Holy Communion), in the Scriptures, in our prayer, in our family and friends, and particularly in the poor and sick. He will not be a stranger to us – like the first boys I met at St. Charles or the first acquaintances I made in Minnesota. We will know him really well through our life of faith – and he will recognize us. Above all, he will look like us because Jesus is the human face of God.

When I was in Zanesville, I remember visiting a woman in hospice care one Christmas Eve. She was near death and I was sure she would be spending Christmas in heaven. But as things sometimes turn out, she fooled everyone and pulled through. She even got well enough to go back home. Someone said she “flunked hospice.” When I next saw her, she told me that she had a near-death experience that Christmas Eve. She saw a bright light and she saw Jesus calling to her. We have all heard of these experiences and I am sure they are often real. This woman said that she was greatly comforted by Jesus’ demeanor – the way he smiled and the way he reached out to her. No doubt this event made for a smooth passage to the next life for this good Catholic woman when she finally went to the Lord. I remember presiding at her funeral – when God decided it was her time.

The Ascension reassures us that we will not be alone when we make our last and greatest and most exciting journey – for on the other side will be Jesus who is God, yes, but who is also our brother and who will be in the flesh reaching out to us with a warm smile!