

I'm sure you noticed that the readings today give us two versions of the Ascension – the first reading from the *Acts of the Apostles*, and the gospel reading. Evangelist Luke is the author of both. If you compare the two carefully, you will note several similarities:

- both include a summary of the key components of the gospel – the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus;
- both include the promise of the Spirit as the powerful mover of Jesus' continuing mission through the church;
- both include the statement that Jesus was taken up from earth to heaven;
- and both include the charge of the risen Jesus that his disciples are to be witnesses of who he was and what he did while he was in the world.

Each account, however, serves a different function. The Gospel version of Jesus' return to heaven functions as a doxology: it's the very end of Luke's gospel, and it brings to a close Jesus' physical presence upon the earth. The account in the *Acts of the Apostles* is the very beginning of the book, and it functions as an introduction to the mission of the church, as told in the rest of the book.

Another difference to note – one that has never been adequately explained – is that the gospel version has the Ascension of Jesus take place on Easter Sunday evening – the very day of the Resurrection – making the Resurrection and Ascension a single movement. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke has chosen to separate the Ascension from the Resurrection by a period of 40 days – to provide a period of post-Resurrection instruction of the apostles, and of us. The number 40 is, of course, reminiscent of the experience of Moses, who spent 40 days on Mount Sinai being instructed by God on the Ten Commandments

(Exodus 24:12-18); it is reminiscent of Elijah, who walked for 40 days and nights on the strength of the food God gave him (I Kings 19:8); and it is reminiscent of the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert preparing for his public ministry (Luke 4:2, 14-15).

During these 40 days, the apostles were receiving their final instructions in preparation for their mission. Several things happened to them during that time – the same several things, incidentally, that should have been happening to us during our 40 days between

Resurrection and Ascension:

- During that time, the reality of the resurrection began to take hold of them. At first, they couldn't believe that Jesus was truly alive; they thought they were seeing a ghost. But gradually, they began to perceive him as truly alive. And they came to realize that the Jesus who died on the cross was the same Jesus who rose and appeared among them. We might ask ourselves: since Easter, have we gradually come to perceive Jesus as truly alive? How do we experience him? Has the reality of the Resurrection taken hold of us?
- During that time, the apostles were gradually becoming aware of *their* place in God's plan of salvation and the responsibilities *they* would assume after Jesus' Ascension. Do *we* have a growing appreciation of the place *we* have in God's plan of salvation, of *our* responsibilities in the kingdom, of *our* importance in the mission of the church?
- During that time, there certainly had to be a great deal of reflection on the Hebrew Scriptures by these Jewish men, who were steeped in Jewish tradition, and on the ministry of Jesus, and on how the one was fulfilled in the other. Isn't this what we've been doing for the last six weeks: reflecting on the meaning of the Resurrection: the **wonder** of it all, the **obedience** which brought Jesus to the cross, the growth of **faith** as more and more learned of the life and death of Jesus, the **newness** of everything because of the Resurrection, the **Spirit** promised to us?
- During that time, there were undoubtedly many experiences of Eucharist in which they encountered their Lord, who became known to them in the breaking of the bread. Every time we gather for the breaking of the bread, we encounter the risen Lord.

The word today is “witness.” The on-going mission of the apostles will be to witness to the truth of Jesus Christ, to the truth of his gospel. The same is true for us: as Jesus departs today, it is our mission to give witness to his truth: to live as He lived, to love as He loved, and to serve as He served. Are we ready to do that?