



SERMON 859

Ascension Sunday

Seventh Week of Easter

June 1, 2014

948th Week as Priest

774th Week at St Dunstan's

39th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

LEAVING FOR US

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We have been companions in the Way, pilgrims on a journey for a long time.

For forty days, we followed our Lord as his disciples on the Jerusalem Road. We began our travels on a day of ashes and dust. From the start, we were reminded—as if we had forgotten—that life is hard, and that we were all going to die someday. But, he said, even death has a purpose, for if we did not die, we would not love God or one another (because we could always put it off until tomorrow.)

That forty days was a wilderness time, often difficult and dangerous. But we felt and believed that we would all be safe because our Lord was with us.

Once he left us, and we did not know where he had gone. We were frightened, abandoned and alone. (As I look back over those wilderness days, I understand that each time Jesus left us we were vulnerable and weak.)

You remember his encounter with the Evil One. When he returned, he was tired and weary—but he had prevailed. And after rest and food and long prayers, he gathered us together and said, “Little children, remember this day. For there will be a time when you will be tempted yourself.”

One night, by the fire, Our Lord said to us,

Give God your humble and contrite heart.

Show forth your gladness.

Let the light of wisdom shine in you.

Love God with a holy desire.

Give yourself to God.

His words burned in our hearts. Our Lord was preparing us for something beyond our selves, greater than our selves. We came to understand that we were on a journey, and we

were together in this task. Each of us was completely committed. We made our way together. We followed the Lord, the Messiah, the Prince of Peace.

Then, at long last, we arrived in Jerusalem. The forty days were over. We came to the gates of the holy city, and there were thousands of people—young and old, rich and poor, healthy and sick—all waiting to catch a glimpse of the Master. They acclaimed him the Anointed One, the Messiah of God, the King of Israel! People cast down their cloaks and waved palm branches before him. Everyone was happy, many weeping tears of joy, many straining just to touch him. It was more than we had imagined, more than any of us could have hoped for! We believed that this was the long-awaited Day of the Lord.

But in a few days, the world disintegrated around us. Jesus was arrested, and we fled. He was condemned to death, and we hid away. He was crucified, and we betrayed him. He died without us, we who had pledged him our loyalty even unto death.

We thought that Jesus of Nazareth would be our strong deliverer. We believed that he was the son of the living God. But at that moment, all we knew was that our Lord was dead,

and our hearts were broken. And we feared that we would be found and killed.

Following our Lord's death, we were completely lost, like blind men groping along a wall. Until Mary Magdalene rushed into the upper room early that Sunday morning, awakening us and shouting that she had seen the Teacher!

"I have seen two angels in the tomb!" she cried, and told of the empty cave, the stone rolled away. And then she said an amazing thing: She turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. He said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" And he called her name, "Mary," and she recognized him, "Rabbi, is it truly you? It is you!" She believed he was raised, but we could not believe it. "Go and tell the others that you have seen me," he told her.

The next forty days were a whirlwind of excitement and possibility. Time and again, the Risen Lord appeared to us—in the Upper Room, at the seashore, on the road to Emmaus. He showed us the wounds in his hands and feet. He ate with us. It was Jesus, risen from the dead!

This conquering of death suddenly became for us a *transformation*—from fear to courage, from weakness to strength, from broken spirits to brave hearts. We were made

different, you see, by our witness to his resurrection—and we would never be the same again.

But then the Risen Lord said that he would be leaving us again—although he had just returned from death’s darkness and the power of hell. At this terrible news, we were more afraid and confused than ever! Jesus, our rabbi, said that he *could* not stay, that he *must* go to the Father. Why or how none of us knew. All we understood at this point was that he had died and now he was alive again!

He commanded us to wait in Jerusalem. “Be patient and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit.” He led us out to Bethany, explaining that we would “be clothed with power from on high.” We felt as if we were in a vision, a dream. Our Lord placed his hands upon each one of us and blessed us. And we saw him disappear into the heavens. We fell on our knees and worshiped him, and we returned to Jerusalem and went into the Temple.

It happened. I am not lying. I have been praying and puzzling over this for days. Much remains unclear to me, but this I know: We are being prepared for something greater, some important work to do in spreading the good news of Jesus the Son of God.

We do not have the knowledge or wisdom or understanding that we need, but we believe this Spirit of God will have them. We have been strengthened by Our Lord's resurrection, but we are going to be made even stronger. We have new-found faith, but we can tell that our faith is growing. We are afraid, but ours is becoming a holy fear.

And one more thing: I am beginning to see that *Jesus did have to leave us*. Had he stayed, we would never have been truly changed. He would always have been here, to do the work of healing, teaching, preaching, caring, and loving. Jesus would have done it all. *We would not have been needed*.

Faith would not have been necessary, nor wisdom, knowledge, understanding, strength, or holy fear. *He left us, but he left for us*—that we might become his hands and feet, that we might truly know—and share with all the world—the power of his love. **AMEN.**

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