



BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF CHICAGO

Feast of the Ascension May 12, 2024
Reflection by Susan Quaintance, OSB

First Reading - Acts 1: 1-11
Second Reading - Eph 1: 17-23
Gospel - Mk 16: 15-20

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses.” We hear those words in our first reading from Acts, one of Luke’s versions of the Ascension. The centrality of witness in this story caught my attention, and I spent a long time trying to shake out what I was supposed to know from it.

One of the places my thoughts took me was back in history to when I was a witness in a criminal complaint. I didn’t like it much. Something happened outside of school that I saw and reported to the police. I ended up having to go to the police station at Western and Belmont, identify someone in a line-up and wound up testifying in court against this person. The whole experience was unsettling. Though I saw what I saw and heard what I heard, it was hard not to doubt myself. I didn’t want to be wrong because of the serious consequences that my testimony would have for the person I was accusing. Though there was another witness, I felt very alone because, of course, the police separated us when it came time to make statements. And even though I’d probably watched the whole process dramatized 100 times on TV, I was unprepared for how sordid it would feel. Through no desire on my part, I got pulled into a situation that was ugly and for which there was no good resolution.

Obviously that situation was much different than that of the apostles at the Ascension. But a witness is the same no matter the circumstance: someone who has seen and heard an event. The trouble is that I wasn’t there at the Ascension. None of us were. I cannot be a witness to the historical Jesus, nor any of the miracles that his physical encounters with humanity occasioned.

But what the Ascension marks is the end of the time of Jesus on earth – and the beginning of the Church. In the absence of Jesus, the apostles clung to each other, telling Jesus’s stories, repeating Jesus’s actions, going where Jesus had told them to go. They awaited the promised Spirit. They created – out of fear and hope and wonder and confusion and memory – church, with a small “c.” Not institution, but experience. Not dogma, but mystery. Not building but sacrament. Of that I do have experience. To that I am called to witness.

So here’s a confession. So far, this reflection is almost exactly what I said twenty years ago when I preached on the Ascension. That year, 2004, was when the USCCB commissioned the John Jay report, which reported that over 4000 priests had been accused of abusing more than 10,000 children between 1950 and 2002. The next paragraph was about the shock and disappointment of that – and how disconcerting it was to try and witness to church (both big and small “c”) amid that shameful reality.

Now, of course, we know much more about that scandal – far more than we want to know – along with others. Though nowhere near that scale, the parish where I work is currently undergoing a rupture of trust that is threatens to unravel what we have known to be a vibrant

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and life-giving parish. Parishioners and archdiocesan staff and people far-removed from parish life have asked me – a part-time employee – what I know, what I saw and what I heard. It has reminded me of the downside of witnessing, of the sordidness that can sometimes come with our shared humanity.

But the next paragraph in my old homily said that the Ascension is a wonderful object lesson in the face of doubt and fear. Though I've had twenty years to grow harder and more skeptical (though I try to resist that pull), I am also struck by that truth. After Jesus was taken up, the disciples went forth and "preached everywhere while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs." A reminder that we, unlike my long-ago police station experience, are not alone in our witness. Like the apostles standing with their faces toward heaven, we belong to a mystery which human events may conceal. Understanding is promised, though, even if the times and seasons are not ours to know.

A commentary I read said, "In the Christian tradition the witness is, in a radical sense, wholly implicated in his or her testimony." I pray that what I say and do implicates me in the gift that the Church is, in the gift that has been handed down to all of us. May we live faithfully, witnesses to mystery and hope.