

5 TAKEAWAYS FROM CHRIST'S 'TAKEN UP'

The Ascension of Our Lord
was more than a return trip to heaven

By Gerald Korson
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The fresco of Ascension of Jesus in kostel Svatého Václava in Prague by S. G. Rudl (1900).
(GettyImages)

The feast of the Ascension of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is an observance that does not seem to generate a lot of hoopla. But it should.

The Ascension of Our Lord is not simply Jesus' way of getting back to the Father. There's a lot more significance to the event in the life of Christ — and to the life of the Church.

Here are five takeaways as to why Jesus was “taken up” to heaven and what resulted from his Ascension.

1. He opened heaven to our human nature

By his bodily Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus brought his human nature into heaven and “opened the gates of heaven” for us. Just as by his rising from the dead he became “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20), so by ascending to heaven he became the first fruits of humanity to enter there.

This means that the just who had died before him were finally able to enter heaven. When Jesus died, he descended into “hell” — not the eternal hell, but “sheol,” the “abode of the dead,” where all who had died then resided. There Jesus preached to these souls, and those who believed in him were saved.

Since his Ascension, all who die are subject to particular judgment at death and immediately go to heaven, purgatory or hell. As he told his apostles, “When I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (Jn 4:3). Because he ascended with his human nature, we have a pathway to enter heaven too.

2. He would send the Holy Spirit

Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, to his apostles. The Holy Spirit would bear witness to him, dwell within them and “teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (Jn 14:26).

But Christ had to ascend to heaven to make this happen. He told them that “if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (Jn 16:7). That is what happened at Pentecost, ten days after the Ascension, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles in the Upper Room and inspired them to go out boldly to preach the Gospel.

3. The work of the Church had to begin

Just before he ascended, Jesus gave his apostles the great commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19).

He had already given them the authority to celebrate the Eucharist and to forgive sins, and had instructed them to return to Jerusalem to await the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit came, on Pentecost, the evangelizing mission of the Church began, and some 3,000 were baptized that day.

The fledgling Church needed the power of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus had to ascend in order for the Holy Spirit to come upon the Church.

4. He remains present in the world in a new way

Even after the Ascension, Jesus is with us. The Church recognizes his presence in the Church, in the hearts of his faithful, in the sacraments, in Scripture and wherever his faithful are gathered. That's a mystical or spiritual presence. But his Real Presence — his body, blood, soul and divinity — remains with us in the Eucharist itself, in the elements of bread and wine consecrated by the priest. Jesus ascended to heaven, but his promise to remain with us is fulfilled most perfectly in the Eucharist.

5. Jesus ascended to return at the end of time

The work of the Church begun at Pentecost will not be completed until Christ returns in power at the final judgment. As the angel told the apostles as they stood staring into the sky after Jesus' Ascension, "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

That's something to reflect on as we celebrate the feast of the Ascension of Our Lord

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