

First your RISUS PASCHALIS, with a nod to Mother's Day. Sam calls his mother who lives a few states away. "Mom, how are you?" he asks. "Not too good," answers Sam's mother, "I'm very weak." Sam, concerned asks, "Why are you so weak, mother?" She says, "Because I haven't eaten in 23 days." Sam stammers. "That's terrible. Why haven't you eaten in 23 days?" His mother replies, "Because I didn't want my mouth to be filled with food if you should call." Nobody can do guilt like mothers! They are the professionals!

Ok, your three points. If we look at the four gospels and what they do with the story of the Ascension, we get two senses. One is that, with the resurrection, almost overnight, the disheartened disciples morph into bold street preachers once they realize their leader has conquered death. That is the simplest version. But if we read the accounts closely, we find the plot is a bit more twisted. Matthew remarks that 'some doubted' even after seeing the resurrected Jesus. John includes a scene from Galilee, several day's walk from Jerusalem, where 6 of the 11 remaining disciples have now gone fishing, apparently resuming their former careers in spite of Jesus' return to life. Mark's original ending said nothing at all about the Ascension, and the later addition mimics Luke and Matthew. Luke gives us the chronology of the 40 days after Easter, telling us that the disciples wander around dazed and confused. According to Luke, the disciples act like survivors of catastrophe, sometimes retreating to familiar haunts once shared with their leader, sometimes clustering behind locked doors. Then in the book of Acts (remember it was written by Luke) the scene shifts back to Jerusalem when Jesus appears once more and hope flutters anew. It's there in our first reading: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Instead Jesus issues a directive that has become known as the Great Commission, sending them to 'the ends of the earth.' As the disciples stand there trying to absorb it all, He floats upward like a balloon into the sky, never to be seen again. We can just imagine Luke smiling as he records it years later, that comic scene of 11 earnest disciples arching their necks to stare at clouds as angels ask the obvious question: "Why do you stand here looking into the sky?" Luke omits the implication: *Didn't He tell you to get moving? Well, do it!*

Second, so why didn't Jesus just stay on earth? If He had had stayed behind in some capacity as Super-pope, there would be no need for church councils, papal encyclicals, or catechisms. We would not have to repent for tragic mistakes made in the name of Christ like the Crusades and the Inquisition and anti-Jewish persecutions, because Jesus could have stopped such misguided endeavors in their tracks. When moral questions arise, such as slavery, end-of-life issues, or gay rights, we could appeal directly to Jesus for a ruling that would settle the matter once and for all. Instead, as if aping the disciples, all too often we stare slack-jawed at the sky or muddle along in confusion. Instead of crystal clear answers to everything, we are constantly struggling to get it right. The ascension turned loose that company of motley pilgrims known as the church.

Why? We don't really know. It apparently is God's plan. And so the message remains: *Why do you stand here looking into the sky? Get moving – you're the main actors now!* Though in 3 years Jesus managed to change history forever, while He was on earth He affected only a few thousand people in a region about the size of New Hampshire. He did nothing for the needs of China or Australia or South America or even Europe. All of that would come later, through the work of His followers. As Jesus told them, in words that barely sank in at the time, "Whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."

We bumbling pilgrims are "the Jesus left behind" after the ascension, the heirs of God's Holy Spirit. Paul takes the concept further, calling us the Body of Christ and God's temple – meaning the actual presence of God in the world. WE are the reason Jesus came, to set in motion a kingdom without borders that

eventually would indeed reach Europe and China and Australia and the Americas. Where is God in the world today? Everywhere! In the riskiest plot twist of all, God has turned Himself loose – in us and through us. When I look at the Church, sometimes I think Poor God! And when I look at me, I say REALLY poor God!

The Holy Spirit does His/Her work through us, through ordinary people who take up Jesus' mission. Our job, in short, is to show the world another way to live. Anne Lamott gives a more contemporary version of this thought: "Again and again I tell God I need help, and God says, 'Well isn't that fabulous? Because I need help too. So you go get that old woman over there something to eat, and I'll figure out what we're going to do about YOUR stuff.'"

Point three. Apparently, God prefers to act through agents, rather than directly. Meteors, glaciers, floods, tectonic-plate movements, volcanic eruptions, genes and DNA strands – all these played a part in forming the planet we inhabit. Next, God assigned stewardship of this planet to the one species made in His image. Then Jesus delegated to human agents – US – the task of spreading the good-news message of God's love, a message that includes not just words but practical deeds. Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul's charge to the Philippians: "Go out into the world uncorrupted, a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society. Provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God."

The theory is great, but how we carry it out is quite another. Skeptics look at the disunity of the church, at the wars of religions, at the slowness to address injustices like slavery and apartheid, and find many reasons to doubt a God of love and justice. They may unfairly overlook many Christian contributions, yet the doubts do not easily go away. God has assigned notoriously fallible human beings the holy task of bringing good news and liberation to the world. In my 39 years of priesting I've seen more corruption in the church than you have read about it. I've been reasonably corrupt myself. So many of the characters in the church seem more suitable for Worldwide Wrestling than for spiritual leadership. Yet I must acknowledge that some of the oddest characters I've met, the larger-than-life ones with a surplus of ego and a deficiency of sophistication and sometimes brains, are those who have accomplished some really great work in God's kingdom: organizing relief work, feeding the hungry, proclaiming the good news. That pattern simply replicates what the Bible shows so clearly. God does not seem to be very picky about whom He chooses. God used Jacob who cheated his brother out of his birthright with his slippery ethics, David the adulterer and murderer, Jeremiah with his depression and morosity, Saul of Tarsus with his abusive past, Peter with his bodacious failures.

None of the human biblical characters, save Mary and Joseph, had much to recommend them. God seems to use the talent pool that is available. None lived without sin and embarrassing failures. Yet somehow God used them to advance the cause of the kingdom. The burden of the kingdom of God rests on the backs of ordinary pilgrims, not angels or spiritual giants.

Why choose a plan with the odds stacked against it? It's like turning over a Fortune 500 company to a gang of 6-year-olds. But the simple answer is in the Bible's overarching theme that God is love. That quality, more than anything else, makes clear the reason behind all creation. Love cannot really exist without an object to receive it. In some incomprehensible way, we ordinary pilgrims have the capacity to bring parental pride to the God of the universe. The notion fills me with awe and wonder – and sometimes regret. At the end of the day I ask myself, "What did I do to bring God pleasure today?" Did I "please God in every way" as Paul prayed for the Colossians? (all of this adapted from John Ortberg, VANISHING GRACE, p. 98-104)

A story to conclude. Thomas Alva Edison came home from school one day as a small boy, carrying a note from his teacher. It was sealed and he was told only his mother could read it. "What does it say,

mother?" he asked. Tears welled in her eyes and she read the letter out loud to her child: "Your son is a genius. This school is too small for him and doesn't have good enough teachers to train him. Please teach him yourself."

Many years after Edison's mother had died, he became one of the greatest inventors of the 20th century. One day he was going through a closet and he found the letter that his old teacher wrote his mother that day. He opened it. The letter read: "Your son is mentally deficient. We won't let him come to school anymore." Edison became emotional upon reading it and then wrote in his diary: "Thomas A. Edison was a mentally deficient child whose mother turned him into the genius of the century." The power of love can literally change the world.

The Feast of the Ascension is a wonderful reminder of what we are supposed to DO because we are baptized – show the world the love of God. What a wonderful task – and God obviously feels that we are up to it. So let's quit looking at the sky – and get on with it! Our world needs a breath of good fresh air – and a whole lot of love. Amen.