

# Spreading hope

## The Ascension and responsibility

The meditations offered on these Fridays of Lent, in the Jubilee Year, were intended to help us remain grounded and steadfast on the anchor of our life: *Christ*. For us, He is *a door* to go through with trust to enter into relationship with God, but He is also *a life* full of nuances and dynamism, to which we are called to patiently convert our hearts.

Contemplating Jesus' baptism, public life and finally, resurrection, we tried to recognise the essential features of a humanity transformed by the Gospel. First of all, the ability to welcome everything as a gift; then, the freedom to go beyond successes and failures; lastly, the humility of knowing how to get back up after every defeat, in the joy of what has been lived in freedom and peace.

There is, however, one final, often hidden quality that our lives can learn to embrace: knowing how to say goodbye, when all that is possible and necessary has been accomplished. That is what the Lord Jesus did at the moment of His ascension into Heaven. In that farewell, He left us a precious legacy: He showed us that it is possible to step aside, restoring history's freedom and widening the boundaries of an ever more universal and inclusive hope.

## The Last Conversion

Before making His final journey from this world to the Father, Jesus meets His disciples and gives them some instructions to avoid falling into an abandonment syndrome. He shows Himself alive to them "by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God" (*Acts of the Apostles* 1:3). Among these "proofs" that Jesus needed in order to take leave of His disciples, John's Gospel preserves one that deserves a closer look. It is the famous encounter between the resurrected Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the garden, a subject much appreciated by preachers and painters of every age.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." (*John* 20:11-15)

In Christ's words of freedom and gestures of love, Mary had experienced a profound and complete interior healing, as the evangelist Luke observed, saying that from her "seven demons had gone out" (*Luke* 8:2). That is why she had followed Him, along with other women and the disciples, serving Him with her own possessions. Now, before the empty tomb, devoid of the beloved Lord's body, Mary can only weep over the emptiness she feels inside.

Listening to Mary's conversations—first with the angels in the tomb and then with Jesus standing behind her—it is clear that her search is still driven by the fear of death. Mary wants to find the body so she can be authorized to live in the memory of what she had experienced with Jesus. For her, it doesn't matter whether Jesus is alive or dead; what matters most to her is being able to recover His body in order to embalm the memory of love.

When we are weeping and in despair, even the corpse of love is enough for us to stay enclosed in our inextinguishable pain. We behave like this too when processing the grief we face along life's journey. We collect memories, set up altars, and develop rituals in an attempt not to lose—at least in our hearts—the presence of the loved one who is no longer with us. Within certain limits, all this is legitimate and necessary: it expresses the value that the life of the other still holds for us even when they are no longer before our eyes. But this tendency to embalm the absent person can also become a pathology that gravely afflicts our hearts, blocking that reopening—so painful yet so necessary—to which we are called after every separation. Often, life is already before our eyes, but we cannot see it until something shakes us from within.

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rab-bo'ni!" (which means Teacher). (*John* 20:16)

Just one word from Jesus is enough to bring Mary out of the inner tomb in which she still finds herself. With great insight, the evangelist John observes that Mary must turn around one last time before she can recognize the Lord who is already before her. The mystery of this last conversion—entirely of the heart—that Mary must undergo is tied to the evocative exchange of names between her and the Lord: "Mary," "Rab-bo'ni." Mary does not recognize Jesus by seeing His face or hearing His voice, but because she feels—again—called by God to a hope of life. This is the definitive conversion that the Resurrection wants to lead us to: the uprising of a heart that refuses to remain locked in sadness and allows itself to be redefined by the heart of another. This was, and remains, the only way to have a personal encounter with the Incarnate Word of God, before and after His Easter Resurrection: to feel oneself called by name while looking upon His face.

The Gospel does not describe how Mary physically expressed her joyful recognition of the risen Lord. Readers of every era have filled in this narrative gap by carefully considering Jesus' response and farewell to her.

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Mary Mag'dalene went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (*John* 20:17-18)

The famous *Noli me tangere* ("Do not touch me"), an inexhaustible source of inspiration in art history, is the final temptation from which the Resurrection must free us. Having gone out in the middle of the night to retrieve Jesus' body, Mary now wants to continue with her plan—holding on to and possessing the Risen Life. Why? What is her hidden motive? A passage from the Song of Songs (or Canticle of Canticles), chosen from the liturgy for Mary Magdalene's feast, gives us a possible key to understanding:

Upon my bed by night  
I sought him whom my soul loves;  
I sought him, but found him not;  
I called him, but he gave no answer.  
"I will rise now and go about the city,  
in the streets and in the squares;  
I will seek him whom my soul loves."  
I sought him, but found him not.  
The watchmen found me,  
as they went about in the city.  
"Have you seen him whom my soul loves?"  
Scarcely had I passed them,  
when I found him whom my soul loves.  
I held him, and would not let him go  
until I had brought him into my mother's house,  
and into the chamber of her that conceived me. (*Song of Songs* 3:1-4)

Mary's desire is similar to that of the bride in the Song of Songs: to reach her beloved, hold him tightly, and bring him into her mother's house. But what does this mean, beyond the metaphor? It means that Mary would be satisfied simply to relive the beautiful experiences she shared with Jesus. She has not yet imagined the newness of life that the Resurrection has come to inaugurate. She thinks it would be enough to restore her old life, rather than allow herself to be led into a radically new one. This is the last great temptation we may face before Christ's Easter: the temptation to resist the power of His Spirit transforming us into new creatures.

But Jesus is clear and resolute: after the Resurrection, there's no going back to childhood, to the mother's house. One must walk forward, towards the Father's house, in the spirit of the Beatitudes.

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In refusing Mary’s adulation, Jesus is not rejecting her love: He receives it, but redirects it. After the Incarnation has been fulfilled in the Resurrection, the temptation to be overcome is that of confining God to one time or place instead of welcoming the complete overcoming of the divide between sacred and profane, which was dissolved by Christ’s blood.

Mary must not cling to the Risen One, but go to her brothers. Only in this way will she avoid turning Easter into a form of religious idolatry, reducing the vitality of Easter love to a ritual or behavioural pattern. Before the Incarnation, we could perceive God in reality only as a symbol. After the Resurrection, we are called to seek Him everywhere as a living reality—especially in the mystery of our humanity: that portion of creation He chose to fully embrace, without fear or reservation.

The Risen Christ is not just one body among others but the head of a mysterious yet real body—that of a new humanity. “He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things” (*Letter to the Ephesians* 4:10).

By becoming like us, the Son of God took nothing away from us but gave us back the place we no longer knew how to occupy. For this reason, His face should not be sought in the image we have created of Him, but in the vast territory of humanity—our own and that of others. The real test of faith in His Resurrection is precisely the face of our brothers and sisters—especially those who, because of their closeness to our own limits, make it difficult or even impossible to recognize God’s presence in reality. Christ immerses Himself in God’s heaven to reveal in history the mysterious and marvellous sign of His body: us, in the relationships we know how to weave and protect.

## Upside Down

The insight offered to Mary Magdalene is extended to all the disciples at the moment of Jesus’ Ascension into heaven. To carry out this final departure from the world, Christ chose to wait forty days—a symbolic period of testing. If the great and final temptation was to imprison the Risen One in a seductive and mesmerizing image, Christ instead chose to dwell lovingly with His disciples, to leave them a final, necessary teaching.

As they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will

come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” (*Acts of the Apostles* 1:9-11)

Gazing at the sky is a beautiful gesture of which our humanity is capable, revealing our spiritual nature. In Christian icons, human figures are often depicted with a blue garment, because men and women made in the image and likeness of God are the only creatures who lift their eyes to heaven in search of a face.

But raising our gaze upward can also be the subtle and dangerous gesture through which we attempt to elevate ourselves towards an ideal—even a religious one—capable of saving us from the jaws of death. The messengers of Christ’s Ascension try to break the apostles’ religious enchantment, with a bold question meant to test their understanding of the paschal mystery. Christ does not ascend to heaven to impose an ideal and abstract life on us, but to enable us to find his presence and experience life according to the Gospel in every place and circumstance. We are no longer to seek God on high, but to recognize the glory of His love in the small things of everyday life, and above all, in the paradox of the cross, where our humanity is fulfilled in its destiny of love. The Ascension overturns the order of things forever: earth and heaven switch roles, the Spirit dwells in visible realities, while human flesh enters definitively into the invisible, so “that God may everything to every one” (*1 Corinthians* 15:28).

The second part of the message to the apostles should send a shiver down our spine: we must lower our gaze to the earth, because Jesus will return in the same way humanity saw him ascend into heaven. But what does that mean, exactly? In what way?

We are invited to recognize that this mysterious mode of Christ’s return must include His entire paschal mystery: passion, death and resurrection. It is precisely through Easter that the members of His body—the Church—are called to make themselves visible in the world.

In other words, Christ’s glorious return at the end of time is anticipated, in history, by the living witness of the children of God: women and men called to reflect His face, to embody His charity, and to make present in the world the mystery of His coming.

Thus is revealed the deep meaning of that mysterious expression: Christ’s return from heaven is fulfilled along with the ascent to heaven of His body—us, Christians who, by carrying their cross daily, bear witness to the truth of the greatest love.

The upheaval caused by the Ascension marks a final reversal, not only cosmological but also existential. Christ exits the stage of history to make space for us—fragile and small men and women—to become a living presence of God in time and space. The Teacher steps away to lead His disciples beyond themselves—outside the stifling fence of illusions and disappointments—where it is possible to grow with patience, in harmony with oneself, and in solidarity with others. It is there that we can finally obey the vocation to become

fully human, as reminded by the Letter to the Ephesians: “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (*Letter to the Ephesians* 4:13).

The adventure of the Gospel continues on earth—between dust and sky—in the dim light of a history now saved because it is embraced by God’s infinite love yet still entrusted entirely to our freedom.

## Synergy

The Ascension of the Lord erases any possible regret over the apparent void of power that God seems to have left in human history. In His return to the Father, the Christian community recognized the essential condition for a more intimate and profound communion with Him through the Spirit, destined to be expressed in witness and service to others. It took a long time to understand this enormous responsibility, because our hearts remain hard and deaf even after the greatest manifestations of love.

Afterward he appeared to the Eleven themselves as they sat at table; and he upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.” (*Mark* 16:14-15)

The Lord Jesus chose to ease the anxiety in the face of the immense task of announcing His Gospel, by formulating a carefully measured imperative. The apostles are called to go everywhere to proclaim the Good News of Christ—not just to every human being, but *every creature*. This broader audience, beyond *those made in the image and likeness of God*, might not be just a linguistic variation.

In Church history, there are many accounts of saints proclaiming the Kingdom of God to animals or forming special and providential relationships with them. Think of Saint Francis preaching to the birds, Saint Anthony to the fish, or saints traditionally depicted with animals: Saint Anthony and the pig, Saint Romedius and the bear, Saint Francis and the wolf, Saint Eustace and the deer, Saint Benedict of Nursia and the crow, Saint Roch and the dog.

Why have these events occurred in history? What is the meaning of Christ’s command? Why is it important to announce the Gospel to creatures and not just to human beings? Because after Christ’s Ascension, a new and definitive creation began in the cosmos. In this renewed order, we can afford to behave as the Creator did in the original creation, when He looked at everything He had made and exclaimed, “How beautiful!”

If we accept the challenge of addressing others first and foremost as creatures, we are compelled to acknowledge their beauty and goodness, just as we do when admiring a flower or resting in the shade of a tree. If we see others only as human beings, forgetting their original status as creatures, we may

easily slip into judgment and expectations in their regard. Proclaiming the Gospel in every corner of the new creation is, thank God, a more restful task. We need not expect reality to immediately or necessarily align with our desires and expectations. The first step is to offer others the fundamental recognition of acceptance and goodwill which we all need as much as the air we breathe.

In fact, we could go even further and say that when we manage to see in our neighbour first of all a creature—like us, formless, fragile, contradictory, and ambiguous—the task of proclaiming the Kingdom of God is already accomplished. The first thing each of us waits to receive from God and from those who aim to speak in His name, is never a call to do something good or different, but the recognition of who we are, with our own lights and shadows. The way of proclaiming the Gospel that Jesus asks of His friends clarifies once and for all what matters most to God: to recognize and honour the life of the other before hoping for or provoking its transformation. With this gentleness, Jesus left in the world the sweet fragrance of a God who never prioritizes doing good to the other, but above all declares that the other's mere existence is already a great good.

In this historical moment, the Church may have a new opportunity: to approach others by recognizing in their journeys not something to be immediately or hurriedly subjected to moral judgment. The deep knowledge of humanity, matured over centuries, demands that we regard each person's story with humility and respect. If the light of the Gospel has allowed us to perceive deep meanings in every fold of reality, then we must also admit that many aspects remain complex, obscure, and difficult to grasp.

If we want to reach—joyfully yet discreetly—the ends of the earth, we need courage to begin a new and fascinating season of evangelization.

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samar'ia and to the end of the earth.” (*Acts of the Apostles* 1:8)

The mission Jesus gave to the witnesses of His Pasch is not only geographical but also anthropological. Bringing the Gospel to the ends of the earth does not have a merely spatial-temporal meaning. Bringing the Gospel to the ends of the earth does not merely mean reaching distant places in space and time, but carefully and respectfully entering the heart of every human condition, embracing its complexity—especially where our categories struggle to understand or classify. To dwell with evangelical wisdom and pastoral charity in those borderlands of humanity where each person's uniqueness is revealed and space is made for God's silent action requires deep listening, welcoming, and discernment.

This approach has nothing to do with ethical relativism or with a generic theological compromise. Rather, it is about remaining faithful to the heart of the Gospel: keeping at the centre the face, story and dignity of every person who

waits, even unknowingly, to encounter the face of God. Then, to discover the ways we can journey together towards the Kingdom of Heaven, removing whatever may hinder this path of a new humanity.

Obedience to this delicate and humble way of bringing the Gospel everywhere allows Christ's body to experience synergy—the communion of desire and life between earth and heaven.

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it. (*Mark 16:19-20*)

Moving away from the One who distanced Himself from us only to become more present within us, the apostles discovered that following the Teacher had now become the possibility of living and acting together with Him, through the power of the Spirit. Thus, the nightmare of our solitude—begun through deception in the Garden of Eden—was forever dispelled. In the Word of God made flesh, crucified, buried, descended into hell, risen, and ascended into heaven, human life became a sort of dance, a mysterious duet accessible to every man and woman under the sky.

Things really did unfold this way: God was pleased to free us from sin and death by leading us into new life through the gift of His Spirit. Rather than patching up the torn fabric of our humanity, God chose to reveal that from the beginning, hidden within it, was the destiny of divine life—to be recognized, embraced, and finally, freely and joyfully assumed.

## Conclusion

The gift of the Ascension left the Church and the world with a unique legacy. In a time when we struggle to step off stage, convinced that our presence must go on indefinitely, the Lord Jesus shows us how precious it is to know how to depart and withdraw, in order to remain in deeper, truer communion.

In fact, our greatest temptation is to enclose life within the bounds of what we've known and experienced. But the risen life—which is eternal—cannot be imprisoned. It's an unpredictable shock, a breath we cannot control, but to which we can surrender, to complete our holy pilgrimage from this world to the Father.

To keep this journey from remaining a mere illusion, we must take seriously the responsibility of witnessing the Gospel, even when it asks us to die to ourselves to give ourselves freely to others. Christ's return at the end of time is mysteriously foreshadowed by every gesture in which our humanity accepts to love, embracing the cross as the seal of our baptism, even, and especially, when it happens in silence or indifference, aware that our life is now hidden with Christ in God.



God's apparent absence from the stage of history is actually a great invitation to us. If the Lord has ascended to heaven, His body's members remain on earth. We are those members, called to embody and witness the truth of the Gospel, without falling into protagonism or monopoly. Heaven and earth are no longer distant or separate, but intertwined in a mysterious synergy of gestures and words that reveal to the world the fullness of time.

This may be the greatest hope to cultivate in this Jubilee year: that as the Church repeats the gestures of her faith and tradition, the world might recognize in us something beautiful and new, capable of sparking a surge of universal hope. And we Christians can return to being what we have always been called to be: men and women who, passing through the narrow gate of Christ's love, become witnesses and facilitators of a new humanity.

*Gladden us with holy joys, Almighty God, and make us rejoice with devout thanksgiving, for the ascension of Christ your Son is our exaltation, and, where the Head has gone before in glory, the Body is called to follow in hope. Through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

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