



## Ascension of the Lord - Sr. Nuala Cotter

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### The Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord/ May 17, 2012

**Acts 1:1-11 ; Eph 1:17-23 ; Mk 16:15-20**

When I was young and going to parochial school, I loved Ascension Day. Why ? That's easy : it was an automatic day off from school at the most beautiful time of the year. As for the feast we celebrated, well, I was a little less clear on what that was about. Mostly my kid's eye view of things saw a pair of feet slicing into a cloud, their owner, Jesus, having presumably blasted off moments before. Since these musings all took place as NASA and Sputnik were locked in the race to the moon, I'd guess that my images came from what I saw on TV- after all, those were the days when Sister would stop class whenever a rocket went up so we could watch it all on our fuzzy black and white screen. Different times, for sure.

Preparing for today's *Lectio* led me to read some essays on the readings for the feast. One writer included a light moment from that scary Cold War era. I don't know if it's true or not, but it made me laugh and then it made me think.

An old man asks his priest grandson about Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet cosmonaut who had said that he didn't see God when he got up into space ; the grandson patiently explains that heaven is not a spatial phenomenon. I love the grandfather's reply : "Oh, you mean those danged Russkis didn't get up high enough !"

Well, Granddad, you might actually be on to something. Getting up "high enough" is hard to do. It's hard to let go of our earthbound ways of thinking and understanding, hard to acknowledge that God is God, and creatures are creatures - that we're limited in our understanding, no matter how smart and scientific we may be. Gagarin didn't like that, but neither do we, not really. We like clarity ; we like to know for sure. But when we read the Word of God, we have to take a more humble stance before it.

Today's readings give us different information about the Ascension : for Luke, it takes place 40 days after Easter. The "longer ending" of Mark, on the other hand, posits Jesus' being "taken up to heaven" on the same day as the resurrection. And if we were to look at the gospel of John with the help of the [New Jerome Biblical Commentary](#), we would see that "John sees Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, exaltation and return to heavenly glory as part of a single event (John 12 : 32-33)." If we're Yuri Gagarin, all of this material just goes to show that the Bible is poppycock, or whatever the Soviet equivalent of that was !

But if we could get up high enough, perhaps we could understand that the gospel writers are speaking of Jesus' exaltation by the Father and that the Ascension story is a way to express that. They have already shown us that Jesus will be exalted : starting at the Baptism with its mighty theophany and continuing at the Transfiguration ; we know that John has Jesus speak of being "lifted up" — more exaltation, though it

goes through the suffering of being first lifted up by the cross.

If we could get up high enough, maybe we would want to stay with the stories and not want simply to work out the physics of the Ascension itself. We might then be moved not only by Jesus' words to the disciples in Mark— "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature" — but also by their response : " they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs."

Remember, these are the same disciples that Mark consistently shows to be reluctant, fearful, disloyal, and not too bright. Now, however, they are completely changed by their experience of Jesus' final charge to them. That's interesting.

If we got up high enough, we'd not only hear Jesus speaking in Acts — "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" - but we'd hear those words as addressed to ourselves, living, as we are, in every corner and end of the earth. That's challenging.

If we got up high enough, we might begin to realize that Jesus' Ascension is not a problem to be solved but a promise to be received.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul offers a beautiful way to think about the meaning of this feast for us. He doesn't comment directly about Jesus' experience, but rather our own :

Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet.

For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

For that which is corruptible must clothe itself with incorruptibility, and that which is mortal must clothe itself with immortality.

And when this which is corruptible clothes itself with incorruptibility and this which is mortal clothes itself with immortality, then the word that is written shall come about :

"Death is swallowed up in victory.

Where, O death, is your victory ?

Where, O death, is your sting ?" (I Cor 15 : 51-55)

The mystery of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension to the Father offers a foretaste of the mystery of our own lives in Christ, right up to and including that glorious moment of exaltation when "we will all be changed, in an instant, in the blink of an eye."

When that day comes, we'll find that we've finally "got up high enough."

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Voir en ligne : [Texts of the liturgy](#)

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