

When Jesus Ascended

*“Touch me not; for
I am not yet
ascended to my
Father: but go to
my brethren, and
say unto them, I
ascend unto my
Father, and your
Father; and to my
God, and your
God.”*

—John 20:17

THROUGHOUT THE WORLD,

many earnest Christians memorialized Jesus’ death on the evening of April 13, by partaking of the “bread” and the “cup,” as he requested his apostles to do while in the “upper room” with him on the night before he was crucified. (Mark 14:15;

Matt. 26:26-29) The date of

this annual commemoration of our Lord’s death is in accord with the Jewish lunar calendar, and occurred on the fourteenth day of the month Nisan, the same day as the typical Jewish Passover lamb was killed. Jesus fulfilled that picture, becoming “Christ our passover,” the “lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”—I Cor. 5:7; John 1:29

Using the same lunar calendar reckoning, the morning of April 16 corresponded this year to the time of our Lord’s resurrection from the dead, which the Scriptures declare occurred on the “third

day.” (Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19) Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus ascended to his Father—this year corresponding to May 26. (Acts 1:3) Ten days thereafter, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the waiting disciples in Jerusalem—June 5 being the equivalent date in 2014. (Lev. 23:4-16; Acts 2:1) Thus, the month of May roughly corresponds to that period following Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, during which he appeared on various occasions to his disciples, and then ascended to the Father—the month ending just a few days prior to the Day of Pentecost.

Regardless of the annual lunar calendar calculations of the above events, the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, along with the subsequent giving of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, were vitally important features in the outworking of God’s plan of salvation. Each year at this season, as our hearts and minds dwell more particularly upon them, we are blessed by recalling various precious texts of Scripture relating to these events, and by meditating upon the important lessons of truth which are conveyed. We recall that meaningful prophecy of Jesus’ resurrection, recorded in Psalm 16:10, which expresses his own confidence that his soul would not be left in hell—that is, his being would not be left in the condition of death—in the grave.

During the period of his earthly ministry, Jesus had made no claim of an ability to raise himself from the dead, but was confident that, if he was faithful, the Heavenly Father would not leave him in death. Thus, in his last words upon the cross, he said to his Heavenly Father: “Into thy hands I commend my spirit”—my life, my existence. (Luke

23:46) The Apostle Peter, speaking on the Day of Pentecost, said, "This Jesus hath God raised up."—Acts 2:32

The Apostle Paul likewise refers to the mighty power of God which was exercised to raise Jesus from the dead, and to exalt him to his right hand. He informed the brethren at Ephesus that he was praying for them that the eyes of their understanding might be enlightened to know the hope of their calling and "exceeding greatness" of divine power which was exercised in the resurrection of Jesus. This same power, he says, is also available to "us-ward who believe." (Eph. 1:17-22) It is because the eyes of our understanding are enlightened that we are able to look at the things "which are not seen," the things which are eternal in the heavens.—II Cor. 4:17,18

In our meditations on this subject, we also think of Paul's admonition in Colossians 3:1-3, where he says that if we are "risen with Christ" we would "seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God." To know that Christ was so highly exalted, and to be assured that we can attain to heavenly glory with him, is surely blessed to contemplate.

Paul gives us another reason we should be overjoyed to know that Jesus has been highly exalted to the right hand of God. It has to do with our imperfections, and the possibility that we might be discouraged by them. He says, "Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." (Rom. 8:34) Again, in Hebrews 7:25, Paul writes that Jesus "ever liveth to make intercession."

The disciples were happy to be assured that Jesus had been raised from the dead. However, it was not until after Pentecost that they understood this precious truth with respect to his appearing in the presence of God for them, and for all who follow faithfully in his footsteps—the “little flock” to whom it is the Father’s good pleasure to give the kingdom.—Luke 12:32

EARTHLY HOPES

The wonderful bond of friendship with Jesus developed by his little band of followers—including the faithful women—was chiefly on a human basis. They did not, as yet, understand spiritual things. They believed wholeheartedly that he was the promised Messiah, and that he would establish the long-promised Messianic kingdom. In his many miracles, they saw evidence of the earthly blessings he would bestow upon all through the agencies of that kingdom.

Shortly before Jesus’ death, when Martha met him returning to Bethany after her brother, Lazarus, had died, she said to him, “If thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee.” (John 11:21,22) Jesus then answered her, saying, “Thy brother shall rise again,” to which Martha replied, “I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Then “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: . . . Believest thou this?”—vss. 23-26

Indeed, Martha did believe, as did Mary and all the disciples. Upon the basis of the miracles they had seen Jesus perform, and because of his marvelous

teachings and the gracious words which he spoke, they believed that he was the Messiah. How they must have been thrilled with the thought of being the disciples of one in whom was inherent such power that even a touch of his garment healed the sick.

They loved their Master, and affectionately so. When he was taken from them and crucified, their sorrow was deep and bitter, and their hopes, which had been centered in him, were frustrated. It is no wonder, then, that when Mary Magdalene discovered the empty tomb, and reported to Peter and John that his body had been stolen, they hastened to see for themselves. It is little wonder also that Mary, crushed in spirit by her disappointment at not seeing the body of her Lord, and then suddenly realizing that Jesus was standing before her, cried, "Rabboni; which is to say, Master," and apparently sought to embrace him.—John 20:16

It must have seemed more than a little strange to her, when Jesus said, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father." (vs. 17) The Greek word here translated "touch" is the one which is used in every instance in which reference is made to individuals "touching" Jesus or his garments for the purpose of being healed. It is also the same word as used in the accounts which tell of his "touching" various ones in connection with his miracles of healing.

Professor Strong defines the Greek word as "attach," and from most of its uses in the New Testament it seems clearly to indicate a vital attachment, resulting in blessings of healing. Throughout their association with Jesus, the disciples, including

Mary, had witnessed the miraculous result of his touch. They had also seen that when others reached out and touched him in faith, believing that they would be healed, his “virtue [power]” went out to them, and they regained their health. (Luke 6:19) For days Mary Magdalene had been distraught with grief over the death of her beloved Master. Now, suddenly realizing that he was no longer dead, but alive, and standing beside her, she reached out in an attempt to attach herself to him that she might never again be deprived of the blessings which she felt he alone could give her. It was a natural thing to do, but it was a human blessing which she sought.

Mary was unable at the time to understand the reason Jesus gave for not wanting her to touch him—“I am not yet ascended to my Father.” The risen Lord commissioned Mary, however, to go to his brethren “and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.” Mary had not been in the upper room the night before Jesus was crucified. Unless some of those who were there had told her that Jesus had spoken about going to his Father, she would not be able to derive any meaning from his statement, especially as a reason for her not touching him and receiving a much-sought blessing.

In the upper room, Jesus had told his disciples that he was going to his Father, and that then he would send the Comforter—the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of truth—which “proceedeth from” the Father. (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7) When Mary carried the message to them from Jesus saying that he had not yet ascended to his Father, they probably

remembered his promise. However, they did not yet comprehend its meaning, nor was it possible for them to do so until after the promise was fulfilled, and they had actually received the Holy Spirit to enlighten and comfort them.

FROM EARTHLY TO SPIRITUAL

From this side of Pentecost, and especially at this end of the age when our returned Lord has served the household of faith with “meat in due season” (Matt. 24:45), we can see clearly what Jesus meant in that statement to Mary, “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father.” It was a way of saying that his relationship to her, and to all his disciples, was now to be on an entirely different basis. No longer was she to think of him in terms of human friendship, nor merely as a mighty one to heal physical diseases and infirmities. He was saying to her, in effect, that from that time forward, the blessings to flow out to his followers from him would reach them through the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit could not be sent to them until he had ascended to his Father.

Mary and the disciples were to learn that their relationship to Jesus was no longer to be on a human basis. While he miraculously appeared to them a few times after his resurrection, when he did ascend to his Father and to their Father, his relationship would be through faith, and through the enlightenment and comfort of the Holy Spirit. Even before Jesus ascended to his Father, his limited association with his disciples during the forty days which intervened between his resurrection and ascension was designed to help them realize

that a great change had occurred, and that they could no longer be with him and enjoy his companionship in the same manner as they did before he was crucified. While he was doubtless personally with them—though invisibly so—most of the time during those forty days, they saw him only a few times, and each appearance in their midst was so different from the others that they did not and could not become familiar with him.

At the same time, the fact that he could appear and vanish at will, even when they were behind closed doors, would help them to understand that he was no longer hampered by fetters of flesh. This, together with his announcement that “all power” had been given to him “in heaven and in earth” (Matt. 28:18), would help to prepare them for what the Holy Spirit later fully revealed to them—namely, that while he had been put to death in the flesh, he had been made alive in the Spirit. As Paul states it, he had been “made a quickening spirit.”—I Cor. 15:45

Perhaps now the disciples began to realize, vaguely at least, the meaning of what the Master had said to Nicodemus, when he explained to him that those who are “born of the Spirit” can go and come as the wind—invisibly—able to exercise mighty power. (John 3:8) When he was with them in the flesh, he at times became physically weary, and would say, as on one occasion, “Come ye yourselves apart . . . and rest awhile.” (Mark 6:31) Hanging and suffering on the cross, he said, “I thirst.” (John 19:28) Now, however, although they saw little of him, there was nothing in his demeanor to indicate that he was in any way subject to human

limitations, or experienced any physical suffering or weariness.

ASCENDED—"OUT OF THEIR SIGHT"

Jesus' last visit with his disciples after his resurrection was most impressive along this line. After telling them that they would receive power through the Holy Spirit, he instructed them to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight." (Acts 1:8,9) This, they knew, was something far beyond the ability of a mere human to accomplish.

It is not surprising that the disciples "looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up." (vs. 10) What a dramatic climax this was to the series of experiences through which they had passed during the six weeks since their Master was arrested and put to death. The two angels who appeared after Jesus had left them, asked, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven?" (vs. 11) The angels did not wait for the answer, for they knew that these "men of Galilee" were at the moment so overcome by their emotions, so surprised, and so utterly unable to comprehend the meaning of the events to which this was such an amazing climax, that they were probably unable to answer.

Then the angels explained, "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven." (vs. 11) It is the "same Jesus" whom they had seen go into heaven, who returns. In fact, he

was the same loving and understanding personality with whom they had been associated during his entire earthly ministry. However, he was now no longer a human being whose literal “touch” healed the sick, or whose “virtue” went out to heal those who would but touch the hem of his garment.

Jesus, with whom they had been so well acquainted, whose companionship they had enjoyed, was the “man Christ Jesus.” (I Tim. 2:5) It was the man Jesus who said he would give his flesh for the life of the world. (John 6:51) The one who was to return would be the highly exalted Jesus, who, since his resurrection, seemed so different. Indeed, he was different, for now he was “born of the Spirit,” having been made a quickening, life-giving, spirit being by the mighty power of God. The resurrected Jesus could enter the room while the doors were closed and locked, and appear and vanish at will. He could be with his disciples for forty days without being seen except when he appeared to them. It was he who was miraculously taken up into the heavens and vanished from their sight behind a cloud. It was this Jesus who was to return, and in the same manner as he had gone away. That is, he would be unobserved by the world, with just a few of his closest friends, his brethren, being aware of it.

From “the mount called Olivet,” where Jesus appeared to his disciples for this last time, they returned to Jerusalem—a sabbath day’s journey away—and abode in an upper room where they “all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.” (Acts 1:12-14) It was not necessary for them to tarry long, for in ten

days the Master's promise to send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, was fulfilled. It was under its enlightening influence that they were now able to fit their experiences into a pattern that was understandable and inspiring. It was in the light and through the power of the Holy Spirit that Peter was able to preach his stirring sermon in which he pointed out the fulfillment of prophecy about the death and resurrection of Jesus—a sermon so powerful that “three thousand souls” were caused to be “pricked in their heart.”—Acts 2:37,41

We are not to think of that mighty manifestation of the Holy Spirit which occurred at Pentecost as being the complete fulfillment of Jesus' promise to send the Comforter. It was, in fact, only the beginning. Neither were the blessings of the Holy Spirit to be limited to the few, specially chosen apostles. In the “upper room” where the brethren had waited in prayer, the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and the brethren were present—a number totaling one hundred and twenty.—chap. 1:13-15

Among those present was undoubtedly Mary Magdalene, to whom Jesus had said, “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father.” As a result of his ascension and appearing in heaven for his church, the Holy Spirit came upon them. Mary would then understand how much more precious and enduring were the blessings he was now able to shower upon her, and upon all his brethren, than were possible while he was in the flesh.

Now, instead of laying hold of his physical being in the hope of obtaining virtue and strength, Mary knew that she could go to the throne of heavenly grace, there to obtain mercy and find grace to help

in every time of need. Beginning at Pentecost, the Spirit-enlightened disciples understood that when Jesus returned to his Father two great blessings for them were made possible. He appeared in the presence of God to “make intercession” for us, and the Holy Spirit was “shed forth” for the enlightenment and comfort of his followers. (Heb. 7:25; Acts 2:33) Mary would now understand this, and would rejoice in the spiritual fellowship with the Father and with the Son which thereby was made possible.

Before his crucifixion, Jesus had said to his disciples, “The Comforter, which is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, . . . shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”—John 14:25-27

Beginning at Pentecost, the disciples experienced the fulfillment of this promise. Puzzled and discouraged when their Master was crucified, now, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, as a Comforter sent from God, they had peace. It was a peace which passed human understanding, born of confidence in the Father’s wisdom and love in directing and caring for them. They knew now that the one who had said to Martha, “I am the resurrection, and the life,” had been given “all power . . . in heaven and in earth” (Matt. 28:18), and that, having appeared in the presence of God for his brethren, the power of the Holy Spirit had been made available for them.

Daily they experienced, and saw manifested in their lives, the power of the Spirit. It opened the

eyes of their understanding to behold the glory of God as it is revealed through his loving plan for the redemption and salvation of mankind. The power of the Holy Spirit, in calling to remembrance the wonderful words of life which Jesus had ministered to them before he was crucified, reminded them of his promise that those who left all and followed him into death would have “treasure in heaven.” (Matt. 19:21) Now they knew what that “treasure” was.

Indeed, the apostles knew and taught that we may hope to live and reign with him, conditional upon dying sacrificially with Jesus, and that we will be made like him and see him as he is. They also recognized, however, that this glorious heavenly reward would not be attained until the Master returned, so his promise that he would “come again” and receive them and all his people unto himself, was the basis of a most blessed hope.—John 14:3

Moreover, the apostles clearly understood and instructed the brethren that their hope of life immortal depended upon the resurrection of the dead. They knew that all mankind is lost in death unless there is a resurrection. They discerned that Jesus, by his own death, made possible the resurrection of both the church and the world, and that his resurrection by the Father guarantees that, through him, all may have life.

By the power of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the enlightened apostles, these truths became plainly understood in the Early Church. Today they flood our minds and inspire our hearts, as once again, in a special way, we call to remembrance that he who said he was the “resurrection and the life” (John 11:25), could not be held in the grave,

because his Heavenly Father used his mighty power to break the bands of death. How we rejoice in the assurance that he who was made alive in the Spirit, and appeared in the presence of God for us, has now returned, and soon, if faithful, we will be with him in glory and see him as he is. ■

“God hath . . . given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”—Phil. 2:9-11