

“He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father.” This article in the Apostles Creed states an essential doctrine of our Catholic faith we celebrate liturgically this weekend.

The doctrine of the Ascension continues the mystery of the Resurrection of Jesus. It proclaims that Jesus in his glorified body forty days after rising from the dead (using St. Luke’s chronology) vanished from physical sight and touch. At same time as we’ve just heard in today’s Gospel reading which concludes St. Matthew’s account of Jesus’ life and ministry, Jesus commissioned his followers to continue his work until, at some unspecified future point, he returns to bring God’s work of the salvation of the world to completion. At the heart of the doctrine of the Ascension is that Jesus ascended into heaven in a physical **human body**, a body like ours. This truth of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven is tremendously important.

In the past, and even among some forms of Christian piety today, there is the tendency to exalt the “soul” over the “body” when it comes to living as Jesus’ followers. These pieties, some of which are undergoing a certain renaissance today, encourage prayer and other spiritual practices to “earn and store up graces” for the sake of “saving my soul” while at the same time fostering a negative attitude toward anything having to do with our physical body, (especially our sexual capacities) seeing it as a “prison” for the soul, a hindrance to living a spiritual life. Without denying the presence and activity of the Spirit in the life of a believer, the Holy Spirit is given and divine gifts are bestowed not only to indwell in us spiritually, but to be acted upon in and through the body. Grace is given **not** to be stored up or in some way deposited, in the manner of a heavenly savings account for some future day, but to be put to use in our daily lives as we hear Jesus command his disciples in today’s Gospel.

Jesus had, and continues, to have ***flesh***. His birth, life, ministry, death and glorification happened in a ***human body***. The third century Church Father, St. Athanasius

stated very succinctly when it comes to Jesus' humanity: "That which was not assumed, was not redeemed." In his life on earth Jesus treated other bodies with reverence and respect. He responded to bodily needs with mercy. When he encountered hungry bodies, he fed them. When he encountered sick and disabled bodies, he healed them. When he encountered bodies of the powerless that had been pushed to the margins, he brought them back to the center. Bodies matter to Jesus. Jesus embodies the truth of God spoken at creation that flesh is good, and flesh is how the Kingdom of God comes.

There is something else we need to realize. The body in which Jesus ascends is not a lily-white, perfectly proportioned, idealized human body. No, the body that ascends to heaven ascends with scars and wounds. Jesus ascends as a disabled God. He has holes in his wrists and his feet. He has a spear wound just below his rib-cage. His scars and wounds are real, markers of his identity, just as ours are. The flesh of the ascended Jesus, though glorified, is still real human flesh.

It is in our flesh, our human bodies, as they are right now, not the idealized selves we may have idealized for ourselves or see promoted in media commercials or internet websites, movies or television shows, but our everyday bodies, with calloused hands, tired feet; bodies that get tired, get hungry, grow weary with the responsibilities and worries of human life; bodies that laugh and cry, bodies with their scrapes, scars and wounds, these are the bodies that Jesus sends forth to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We are the body of Jesus that is to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the immigrant and the refugee, minister to the sick, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead, work to bring forgiveness, reconciliation and justice to the oppressed, proclaiming through words, but even more by action, all that Jesus has commanded us.

Fr. Jim Secora