

Fr. Gary's Homily Notes

Feast of the Ascension of the Lord | May 12, 2024

A little boy was spending his Saturday morning playing in his sandbox. In the process of creating roads and tunnels in the sand, he discovered a large rock in the middle of the sandbox, right in the way. He dug around the rock and then used his feet to push and nudge the rock across the sandbox until he got it to the edge. But there was no way he could lift it; and try as he might, he couldn't even roll it up and out of the sandbox. He grunted and struggled but only to have the rock roll back, smashing his little fingers. Finally, he burst into tears of frustration.

What he didn't know was that all this time his older brother was watching from the back deck. Right at the same moment the tears fell, a shadow fell across the little boy: the older brother. "Why didn't you use all the strength that you had?"

His little brother sobbed back, "I did use all my strength."

"No, you didn't. You didn't ask me." And with that, he reached down, picked up the rock and tossed it from the sandbox.

That is the Ascension story that we celebrate today. In any struggle in our lives, we are never at our full strength until we call upon our brother: Jesus the Christ.

The Feast of Ascension is set forty days (give or take) after Easter. Forty days, not as some chronological magical moment, but simply as "enough time." Jesus, after his resurrection, appeared to his disciples, presenting himself alive to them. But now he sent them out to do what they had been called to do, to proclaim the gospel. He promised he would continue to *work with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs*, signs like handling serpents and drinking poisons. (No small wonder!) But they found that greater things would challenge them.

But they soon found that if they were to *preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace*, if they were to live their lives worthy of the call they had received, they would need far greater gifts than these. They would need humility (because they couldn't do this without God's help); they would need gentleness (because force and fear had no place in God's kingdom); they would need patience (it will happen – but it will happen in God's time). In a word, they (and we) need the gift of God's grace.

How often do we feel like that little boy in the sandbox, struggling to lift the rocks that we uncover in our lives: the rock of our impatience and hardness of heart, the rock of injustice and prejudice, the rock of doubt and fear, the rock of addictions and unhealthy living and thinking. These are the rocks that separate us from one another and from God; they obstruct our personal lives and the communities in which we live from truly knowing the fullness of God's peace and love.

And how often we want to give up! We accept these obstacles, these rocks, as the things we will just live with. We become content with mediocrity; we live with war and crime and poverty as if we can't do anything about it, anyway. We learn to maneuver around whatever elephant is in the room, pretending that it is not there. Try as we might to remove these boulders in our lives, we finally just give up. Like the little boy, tired and our fingers smashed, we just quit in frustration.

But Ascension proclaims a truth that overshadows our weaknesses, a truth that stands above our failures, a truth that lifts the burdens that we cannot do on our own: in the ascension of Jesus, God's grace is given to each of us. Jesus Christ is still with us. His shadow falls upon us.

Like the disciples of old, we can do amazing things with the help of Jesus Christ. He is there, just waiting to be asked.