

## Ascension B 2018

1. The amazing fact of the Ascension lifts our gaze to Heaven. Because Jesus is now in Heaven, body and soul, we are assured that Heaven is not just a nice idea, a myth, or wishful thinking. It is a real place where Jesus has gone ahead to prepare the way for us.

One of Aesop's Fables shows just how new this Christian revelation really was. Aesop was a Greek slave who lived before the time of Christ. He was renowned for his natural wisdom, which was recorded in his famous fables, or short stories with deep lessons. One day he was ordered by his master to go to the public baths (in ancient times public baths were like country clubs) and get things ready.

On his way, he was stopped by one of the official judges of the city. The judge asked him where he was going. Aesop, thinking that it was none of the judge's business, answered, "I don't know." The judge was offended by this reply, which he considered disrespectful, and marched him off to prison for punishment (disrespectful slaves could be punished without a trial). When they arrived at the prison, Aesop turned to his captor and said, "Judge, when I told you, 'I don't know where I am going,' I was speaking the truth. Little did I think that I was on my way to prison! You see, it is true indeed that we never really know just where we are going."

Faced with this explanation, the judge had no choice but to let Aesop go free. This ironic story illustrates the absolute uncertainty of pre-Christian humanity about what happens after death - they just didn't know. (E-Priest).

2. Wellington and Napoleon were fighting the battle of Waterloo. It was a decisive battle. Life for many, many persons hinged on its outcome. At last, word was transmitted to London by means of semaphores - a visual code with reflected sunlight spelling out the message letter by letter. A sentry picked up the message from his post atop a great cathedral. Letter by letter he passed on the message to London. The first word was "Wellington." The second word was "defeated." Suddenly a very dense fog settled in upon the cathedral, making it impossible for the light to penetrate the mists and allow the message to be forwarded any further. The fog grew more dense, and its

darkness was mirrored in the hearts of the Londoners who had received the word, "Wellington defeated." It meant that Napoleon had won. The English of London were a conquered people. Hope was gone. Liberty was no more. England was ruled by another.

But as suddenly as it had come, the fog lifted. The sentry returned to his tower, and went back to his duties, feverishly attempting to transmit the whole message. And London saw it - the good news breaking upon the city and telling the full story: "Wellington defeated the enemy!" Whether the semaphores' message to London is history or fiction, it does convey the truth of Christian Faith! That truth is the shout first heard in Joseph's garden as the earliest followers of Christ made the discovery. It is the victory message of Jesus' word to his disciples upon that Galilee mountaintop, and it is the shout heard through the centuries as human life has been understood as life lived in two worlds - one temporal, the other eternal.

3. "In Fourteen Hundred Ninety-two/Columbus sailed the ocean blue!" In 1992 the world marked the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' adventure in the Santa Maria. As we all now know, Columbus did not end up where he was headed, which is why some native Americans are now called Indians. This man from Genoa believed, "God granted me the gift of knowledge ... (and) revealed to me that it was feasible to sail ... to the Indies, and placed in me a burning desire to carry out this plan." Columbus set out with a belief that he had tested with his mind, and with a Faith to which he was willing to give his life! How many of us can walk in Columbus' shoes?

When, on Friday, August 3, 1492, the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, eased away from their moorings at Palos, in southern Spain, Columbus was putting his beliefs and his faith into the realities of life.

Before the reports of his trans-Atlantic travel penetrated the Old World, Spanish coins had stamped upon them an outline of the Straits of Gibraltar. Underneath the outline of the Straits was the Latin inscription *Ne Plus Ultra*. It translates, "No more beyond." It meant that the world ended in the great expansive voids of water beyond the Straits. There was nothing more.

But once Columbus returned home and told of what he had seen, of what he had discovered, and once that report was widely shared, new coins were minted. The inscription was changed to *Plus Ultra*. It translates, "More beyond!"

That is the mountaintop affirmation which came to the disciples in Galilee and the word that ends Matthew's Gospel.