

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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The Ascension of the Lord

Jesus would never ask us, or any of his followers, to do anything in service to God that He had not already been willing to do himself, right? Forgive sinners, love those who hate us, turn the other cheek, comfort the afflicted, extend generous hospitality and all that. We're invited to live that way because He did, and we know that it's possible because it was for him. He asks nothing more of us than to do the things he did. Right? Well, actually, no. In fact, if we are true to his commands then we not only *may* but we *must* do things that he didn't do. And we need to look no further than today's gospel for proof of that. His solemn graduation speech to his disciples just before he leaves this earth and ascends into heaven, finds Jesus announcing this:

"Go into the world and proclaim the gospel to every creature..."

It sounds a very noble and honorable commission indeed. And it is. But it's not anything that Jesus himself ever did. There's not a shred of evidence in the Bible that Jesus ever travelled more than about 30 miles outside of his native country, and even that only a few times. And he never set out to preach to pagans or gentiles, nor did he summon any of them to listen to him speak. He spoke in the places where Jews gathered, not in other venues. Occasionally he had incidental encounters with other kinds of people, but only because they either came to him or he happened to be walking by. And although he was always compassionate with them, he didn't always seem eager to engage their problems. Jesus never worshipped in public with communities other than Jewish ones, and all the stories we've been hearing again this Easter season about life in the early churches in the Acts of the Apostles are describing a way of life that Jesus never practiced himself.

So would Jesus ever ask us to do things that he chose not to do himself? You bet he would—and he did.

And about all those miraculous signs that Jesus said would validate the preaching of the gospel? Well *he* never handled deadly snakes or drank poison, or spoke in any languages other than the local ones. Such confident predictions like these were never first tested by him. All of which is to simply say that when it comes to *us* trying to know how to be faithful disciples of the Lord in our own time and situations, it's not sufficient merely to ask, "What would Jesus do?" because Jesus himself asks us to do *more* than that. Jesus of Nazareth, although he was God, was also fully a human being. Which means that like all humans, he lived in one specific time in history, not several. He lived among one sort of culture and religious community, not many of them. He could travel as far as his two feet would allow, and no farther than that. And as long as he remained bound to this earth he was limited by the same constraints that every Earthling has. He couldn't defy gravity or step outside of time. And that's why he had to leave this world in physical form if the gospel was ever to be allowed to live anywhere else—and *everywhere* else. "Go into the whole world," he commanded them that day, "into places I've never seen and among people I've never met and amid challenges and opportunities that I've never confronted." Jesus of Nazareth couldn't do all of that, but his Spirit-filled church can—and must.

So the measure of our faithfulness to Jesus Christ now is not how well we can try to imagine how a 1st Century Jewish man would respond to 1st Century Jewish problems, or to 21st Century American ones. It is, rather, our willingness to welcome the Holy Spirit into the Church that Jesus established, in order to dare to do things that he never could or would when he walked among us. The Lord is still with us, as he promised, but not in the same way that he was before his resurrection. He is now unlimited by the things that the rest of us mortals still

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have to contend with—like age and weakness and sin and time and space and even death. He is with us, through the indwelling of his Spirit, so that we can meet with confidence and courage the new challenges of our own moment...like terrorism or despair, or cynicism or religious pluralism, or climate change or massive movements of immigration. There are genuinely new things that demand a gospel response in our own manner, together, under the guidance of the Spirit. We are still *grounded* in Jesus but we are even more expansive than Jesus in what we presume to be doing in the church today, because that's what *He* told us to do and to be.

If we Christians claim to be faithful to Jesus but refuse to say and engage the things that he never did while he was with us in physical form, then we really aren't so faithful. That's risky, and exciting and sometimes dangerous for the unknown, but it's true discipleship. And it's what keeps our religion from being only an ancient philosophy or a boring old story. It lives because He lives, because we live in him today, and into the future to which we are invited.