

# The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

1757 Conway Street • St. Paul, Minnesota 55106 • phone 651.774.1585 • e-mail [church@stpascals.org](mailto:church@stpascals.org)

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Do not try this at home. Do not attempt to drive out demons. Do not drink deadly poison. Do not let venomous snakes bite you. And do not expect that laying hands on sick people will cause their recovery. Get them to the clinic, too. In other words, as Deacon Rich Moore urged us this week, read the bible as a *Catholic*, which means using your brain as well as your heart. We certainly have enough space in our faith for the possibility of miracles, and I have seen a few of them, but a truly Catholic sense of things involves living in the world such as it is, not magically creating a parallel universe of fantasy. Today's gospel of the Ascension is a strange one, but an important one in reminding us that the New Testament bears witness to faith in the risen Lord, and not always to literal facts. So if we aren't supposed to wake up tomorrow with the ability to speak Swahili or Latin, what exactly is a gospel like this supposed to mean?

It means something far more basic and far more important. It means that believing in Jesus Christ and proclaiming his good news is supposed to be more than just a lot of words and information and ritual activity. It's supposed to make a difference in the way people experience real life—both those who are *bearers* of this message and those who are *hearers* of it. The bible is not intended to be one more book on the shelf, next to the dictionary and the auto repair manual. It is not primarily a source of data or historical events or ancient wisdom—although it is that, too.

It's meant to change the world, sometimes in astonishing ways. Human beings are supposed to be transformed as the result of an encounter with Jesus in and through his disciples—*us!* Communities are supposed to be conspicuously *different* for having embraced this gospel, able to look out over the whole sad pile of current events that everybody else can see, and to find in it a life source, a hope for the future, an impossible dream.

In a moment of history when it seems that it's unwise, or impractical, or even dangerous to live in the manner that Christ showed us, we're the ones who are commissioned and commanded to say that it isn't so, and to *live* that way. Mercy trumps revenge. Solidarity trumps personal, ambitious greed. Peace trumps violence. The poor and vulnerable trump the rich and self-satisfied. Money isn't that important. We're actually supposed to *believe* all this and then share it with others. When you think about it, that doesn't sound much less crazy than drinking poison or cozying up to the snakes. It's an astonishing reversal of life-as-usual. It's turning conventional wisdom upside down. Do we really get that, even now? And if we do, are we ready to organize our daily lives according to that belief? If not, then the bible is just an almanac of information. But if so, then our mission is to change the world...mostly in less dramatic ways, but just as radically—and in that respect, just as “strangely.”

Today's Gospel of Mark is unusual for several reasons. It's the very end of his Jesus story, and almost no serious bible scholar believes that it was written as part of Mark's original text. It was added later because the early church thought that the original ending wasn't very flattering or empowering. That original ending told of the disciples running away from the empty tomb on Easter morning and being immobilized with fear and confusion. Not a happy ending and not very motivating for the first generation of Christians. It doesn't require any faith at all to live in fear and doubt. Pretty much everybody else does that already, just as they did back then. Our summons is to something far greater, as believers in this Messiah.

Instead, the revised conclusion of St. Mark issues an order, from the very lips of Jesus:

“Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.”

And that’s exactly what the first believers did. We are the proof of that today and now the same responsibility is ours—if we dare to live as radically as they did.

Today’s feast of the Ascension of the Lord recalls for us that Jesus of Nazareth is no longer here to do the hard work for us. He’s not absent, but he now lives and moves and acts on Planet Earth in and through us. Which means, to say it negatively, if *not* in and through us, then he’s really not much alive—consigned to a book on the shelf. Ho-hum. That is our choice. That is our opportunity and our commission.

“They went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.” Probably not a lot of sipping poison or snake handling, but probably a whole lot of forgiving of enemies, time spent with the sick and dying, crying out for justice when it was absent, and for peace when that seemed foolish, and welcoming in the ones who would otherwise be neglected or cast out. Then, as now, we certainly have our work cut out for us.