

Solemnity of the Ascension
St. Mary's Church
Fr. Michael Renninger

Tillie made the best spaghetti sauce in Norristown, PA.

When her children were young, Tillie would make huge pots of spaghetti sauce – or, as she called it, “gravy” – every Sunday afternoon. The aroma of garlic, sausage and tomatoes was mouthwatering. She made so much gravy on Sunday that she could use it to feed her 6 children at several other meals during the week.

Eventually, as she got older, Tillie only made gravy for Christmas and Easter. Everyone agreed – no one made sauce as good as Tillie. And they could not imagine Christmas and Easter without that gravy.

After Tillie died, her family knew that Christmas and Easter dinner would never be the same. Her gravy was gone. But the following Christmas, when I saw her family, her husband was smiling. I asked him, “Why are you so happy?” And he said, “Father, I found out last night that my daughter knows how to make Tillie’s gravy. When we sat down for dinner, we all realized that Carmela makes sauce just like her mother!”

(What I WANTED to ask Carmela was this – ‘when are you going to invite me over for some of this pasta?’) But instead I asked, “Carmela, why didn’t you tell us that you knew how to make it?” And she answered, “As long as mom was with us, there was no reason for me to say anything. But now that she’s gone, I decided that it was time for me to get to work.”

Now that she’s gone, I decided that it was time for me to get to work.

As we listen to the first reading and the Gospel on this feast of the Ascension, we learn several important truths. First, at the Ascension, the Risen Christ leaves his disciples in a definitive way. During the years of his ministry, the disciples had experienced Jesus in the fullness of his humanity. They treasured his presence. After his resurrection, he was present to them on numerous occasions, revealing himself through his risen body. But after he ascended to his Father, and was taken from their sight... *He was gone*. They would never again encounter Jesus in such a tangible way. True, his Spirit would be with us always – true, the Eucharist makes his presence accessible to us – but his physical body was taken from our sight. He was gone.

At that moment, the disciples had a decision to make. They could fall into despair, or they could grow angry at God for taking Jesus away. But they didn’t. Instead, they came to understand what Carmela said to me several years ago. Remember, Carmela said to me, “Now that my mom is gone, I decided that it was time for me to get to work.” Jesus’ disciples came to the same conclusion. Now that Jesus was gone from them (in his bodily form) they decided that it was time for them to get to work, doing what Jesus had done. While he was alive, it was appropriate for JESUS to do the teaching, for Jesus to do the

healing, for Jesus to do the feeding. But now that he has ascended to the Father, it is time for his disciples to get to work... to do what Jesus did.

Which brings us back to the truth of the scriptures. In both readings, Jesus tells his disciples, *you are my witnesses*. And that word, “witness,” does not simply mean that they were supposed to go and *talk* about Jesus. They are supposed to *bear witness* to Jesus by doing everything he did! He has ascended to heaven. So we cannot stand there, looking up, waiting for *him* to do something. Now it’s time for *us* to get to work.

You know, we Catholics have always been taught that prayer is important. We’ve been taught that we should pray about everything, that without God we can do nothing. And all of that is true. We **MUST** be people who raise our hearts and minds to heaven in prayer.

But there is a danger: we can use prayer as an excuse to **DO NOTHING**. We can spend large chunks of our lives, looking up to heaven, saying to God, “**YOU** should do something about this!” We convince ourselves that, if we have prayed about something, we have fulfilled our responsibility as Christians.

But the angels appear to the disciples and say, “Why are you standing there looking at the sky?” In other words, once you’ve finished praying, then it’s time for you to get to work.

SO, PERHAPS YOU SHOULD NOT PRAY ABOUT SOMETHING UNLESS YOU ARE WILLING TO DO SOMETHING. DO NOT ASK GOD TO CHANGE SOMETHING UNLESS YOU ARE WILLING TO WORK FOR THE CHANGE. DO NOT ASK GOD TO FIX SOMETHING UNLESS YOU ARE READY TO ROLL UP YOUR SLEEVES AND HELP WITH THE FIXING.

There are so many days when I say, “Someone should do something about this.” Maybe that someone is me. There I days when I say, “the people in charge should change that.” Maybe I am the one who has to start the change. There are times when I look to heaven and say, “Lord, help that person.” But the angels come back and say, “Stop looking up, and you do the helping!”

While he was walking the earth, Jesus was a healer. But he’s ascended. You are his witnesses. It’s time for us to become the healers.

While he walked the earth, Jesus fed the hungry. But he’s ascended, so don’t look to the sky for someone to feed the hungry. **YOU ARE HIS WITNESSES**. You get to work!

While he walked the earth, Jesus was a peacemaker. So if you’re concerned about violence, don’t just stand there looking up, **YOU** do something about peace, or violence, or terror.

While he walked the earth, Jesus spoke up for justice, he included the oppressed, he welcomed people on the fringe of society. **WE ARE HIS WITNESSES**, we need to get to work doing the same.

While he walked the earth, Jesus preached good news, he taught the young, he spent time with the old. We are his witnesses. It's our turn.

While he walked the earth, Jesus questioned our assumptions, he shook up the status quo, he challenged those who did not recognize the divine dignity of EVERY human person and every human life. Now that he's ascended, will his witnesses go and do the same?

While Tillie was alive, SHE was the one who should make the gravy. Once she was gone, it was time for her family to do as she had done. It was time for them to get to work. Perhaps St. Augustine summarized the Ascension best when he said: "Pray as if everything depends on God. Work as if everything depends on you."

Don't just stand there looking up!

While he walked the earth, Jesus ate, and laughed, and loved, and forgave; he wept, he worked, he prayed, he rested. You are his witnesses. Go and do the same, in Jesus name!