Today’s celebration of the Ascension of the Lord may, at first, seem somewhat minor as its remembrance has, in many places, been transferred to this coming Sunday. At the very least, what is recounted in today’s readings from the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles seems an odd event: as the disciples watched, Jesus is lifted up, taken by a cloud, into the heavenly realms, there to be seated at the regal right hand of the Father. It almost appears ghost-like, calling to mind Casper or some other fictional figure!

But, while it is assuredly a mystery, that need not mean we should relegate it to the realm of magic. Quite to the contrary, the mystery we celebrate in the Ascension is more meaningful than magical, and this meaning encompasses three critical elements of our faith.

First, the Ascension confirms the reality of the Resurrection. For forty days now, the resurrected Jesus has been present in the midst of his disciples, demonstrating in his very person the reality of the new life that began, for him and for us, on Easter. He is alive and is so for all eternity.

Second, the Ascension completes the journey of the Christ. He who assumed our human nature at Christmas, who came down from heaven in that divine emptying (kenosis) of himself to take on all that is human, now returns there in the fullness of His glory. Today that journey is complete. Today we recall that His journey is ours, for life as we know it is not limited to this earthly realm. We are all called to union with God in heaven and one day we, too, shall make that journey “home.”

Realizing that eternal destination, the third element of the Ascension is the call for each of us to see life differently. With this completion of Easter, and in anticipation of the enabling gift of the Spirit to be received at Pentecost, we are now invited to look upon all that this life entails in a new way.
Now we are to see not with the eyes of the body, which only see what is appealing to our senses, without consideration of whether what we see is good or not. Nor should we see with the eyes of the mind, for we well know that many things in this life do not make sense to our rational thinking. No, the mystery of the Ascension invites us, as St. Paul invites the Ephesians in today’s second reading, to see with the eyes of the heart.

As you study for your anatomy final exams, you may not think that the heart has eyes. But it does! For it is with the heart that we “see” those things we care about most. It is with the heart that we see what really matters in this life. And an enlightened heart, Paul says, enables us to be hopeful because it sees the entire, bigger picture – the mystery of the journey from God at our birth, with God in the mercy extended to us in His Son’s life, death and resurrection, and ultimately back to God in the eternal life opened for us. Today that last phase of the journey is completed and the way opened for each of us.

That is why we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord with such solemnity, even if without music today since our pianist and cantor are busy studying! And even if you don’t think you’ll see anything other than your textbooks and notes until next week, know that with this mystery of our faith you are able to see all of life in a new light.

This is why the disciples return to Jerusalem and take up their mission in the world with great joy. They’ve seen with the eyes of their heart what great things are possible because of what our gracious God has done for us. You, too, will be witnesses of this joy and hope …when you learn to see with the eyes of your own hearts. And the world will know this power of the Gospel when they see that joy in you, even if only by the way you smile!

+ May God Be Blessed +

REV. THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S.