

Ascension

Year A, 2026

Acts 1:1-11 Eph 1:17-23

Ps 47 Mt 28:16-20

And a cloud took him from their sight

In St Luke's account of the ascension, which we heard in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the Lord tells his disciples that they will be his witnesses, first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. The coming Holy Spirit will embolden the disciples, making them "*ready to give an explanation for the reason for their hope*" (1 Pt 3:15). And that hope is everlasting life, founded on Jesus' rising from the dead, and the task set forth for every disciple is to simply bear witness to that hope, no matter the outcome of that witness. The disciple bears witness; the Spirit convinces.

All the Scriptures, too, bear witness to Jesus. And it is the Spirit who convinces. One can read the Scriptures, study them for a lifetime, and yet never be moved by them to belief. But if the Spirit opens a mind to Christ, then the Scriptures spring to life, or rather, through their witness, a heart springs to life, like a divine fire within, that consumes and spreads, giving off light and warmth, peace and courage.

We are reminded of this powerfully at the end of St Luke's gospel (24:13-35), where the disciples are leaving Jerusalem on Easter Sunday, journeying to Emmaus, dejected after the death of Jesus, but perplexed at reports that earlier that day his tomb had been

found empty, and that the women had had a vision of angels announcing that he was alive. Jesus appeared to these disciples along the way, but they did not recognize him, and he explained to them all that referred to him in the Scriptures, giving them a reason for their hope. That evening as he stayed with them, *“he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them.”* Their eyes were opened, they recognized him, and *“they said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?’”* The Spirit had convinced them, won them over, and *“they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem”* to meet the other disciples so that they could bear witness to what they had just experienced: they had seen the risen Lord, who was *“made known to them in the breaking of bread.”*

The Scriptures bear witness to Jesus, whose own recognize him in the breaking of bread, the Eucharist. Today, I want to examine an image from Scripture that bears witness to Jesus and points to the Eucharist by which we know him present in our midst.

Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father. As Jesus spoke to his disciples and told them to remain in Jerusalem and wait for the *“promise of the Father,”* the Holy Spirit, to come upon them, *“he was lifted up,”* as they looked on, *“and a cloud took him from their sight.”* A cloud took him from their sight.

In the Scriptures, the cloud is a mysterious entity that both reveals and conceals the divine presence. To give a couple of examples from the Book of Exodus: in Exodus (13-14), the Lord leads the people of Israel out from Egypt and through the wilderness, appearing before them as a “*column of cloud*” during the day to show them the way and a “*column of fiery cloud*” to illumine the night and defend them from the Egyptian army. Then on Mt Sinai, the Lord reveals himself and his glory to Moses in the form of a cloud that covers the whole mountain (Ex 24). Moses passes into the midst of the cloud for forty days and forty nights, during which God reveals the Law and allows Moses to see his glory and goodness, but not his face (Ex 33:18ff). Moses’ encounter with God in the cloud altered his appearance, making the skin of his face radiant, so that he had to veil his face before the people of Israel, who were afraid to come near him (Ex 34:29ff).

So the cloud both reveals and conceals the divine presence. And the same dynamic is at work with Jesus. Let us think for a moment about the transfiguration. At his transfiguration on the mountain, Jesus and the disciples are enveloped by a mysterious cloud from which comes a voice that reveals Jesus as the Son of God, and yet the cloud conceals the awesome majesty of the speaker’s divine glory (Mt 17:1-8). And at the transfiguration, who appears with Jesus but Moses, who spoke with God in a cloud; and Elijah, too, appears, who was taken up into heaven by a fiery chariot in a

whirlwind (2 Kgs 2). The disciples were so overawed that they fell facedown to the ground to hide this vision of glory from their sight.

And now something similar happens at the ascension. As Jesus is lifted up, a cloud appears, revealing his glorious entry into heaven, but also concealing, as it takes Jesus forever "*from their sight.*" No longer can the disciples see Jesus with their bodily eyes, and so they set the longing of their hearts on what is beyond sight. Their hope remains in and with Jesus, and longing to be with him forever, their one desire is now heaven, where Christ has gone before them. But before he was lifted up, Jesus gave the disciples a charge, his final will and testament, we can say: to make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them and teaching them all that he had commanded. Again here we see the joining of hope and witness, for hope and witness together make mission.

But in his parting words, Jesus left a promise to all the disciples, those gathered with him on the mountain and those gathered in his name here today: "*And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the world.*" No longer with us visibly, in bodily form, the Redeemer's presence has passed into the sacraments, which he himself left us as a memorial of his presence (Leo the Great, Sermon 2 on the Ascension). Especially in the sacrament of the holy Eucharist, the breaking of bread, the Savior remains with and among his disciples. The eucharistic Body of the Lord shapes, feeds, and gives life to his mystical body, the Church.

A cloud takes Jesus from their sight, yet he promises, *“I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you”* (Jn 14:18); *“I am with you always”* (Mt 28:20). By these words, Jesus does not mean the Holy Spirit, for he and the Holy Spirit are two different Persons. He is not exchanging himself for the Holy Spirit, whom he calls the *“promise of the Father.”* Jesus means that he himself will be with us always; he himself will come to us. But until he comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead, his presence with and among us will be veiled, hidden: it is the Eucharist, by which we worship Christ who in the Bread and Wine is hidden Lord and God.

Can you see, then, how the elements of the holy Eucharist are a cloud that contains the divine presence, revealing and at the same time concealing the Lord Jesus? The bread is a cloud that hides the Body of Christ within it. The wine is a cloud that hides the Blood of Christ within it. But the bread and the wine also reveal the Body and the Blood. In the holy Eucharist the Lord is not revealed to us in his sensible form, for in the ascension he has passed bodily from this world. Rather, the Lord’s presence is revealed to us by faith, which is surer than sight, by his teaching whose authority is accepted by believers, enlightened from on high, according to his own words, *“This is my body; this is my blood. Do this in memory of me.”* *“For we walk by faith, not by sight,”* as St Paul would explain in his second letter to the Corinthians (5:7).

The cloud revealed his glory, but took him from our sight, and yet he remains with us, though unseen by human eyes. In the Bread-

no-longer-bread and the Wine-no-longer-wine we receive him whom we no longer see, but who remains with us, invisible to our sight, but perceived and discerned by faith.

And in this, his promise to come to us, to be with us, lies all our faith and all our hope: that Jesus indeed remains with us until the end of the world, is made known to us in the breaking of the bread, and by the power of the Holy Spirit makes us witnesses of hope, witnesses to the ends of the earth of the promise of heaven, where he is forever seated in glory at the right hand of the Father.