

# Opening the Word: Witnesses on earth



There must have been a wondrous and yet anxious expectation that filled the disciples on that first [Ascension](#). [For 40 days](#), the Lord had appeared to them in Jerusalem. He had set their hearts burning on the road to Emmaus, interpreting for them all the Scriptures.

And now, he was gone.

The departure was different than that of [Good Friday](#). Instead of laying his body in the cold tomb, Jesus ascended into the clouds. Instead of a cry of lamentation upon the cross, there was a joyful shout of exaltation: “God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord” (Ps 47:6).

Still, Jesus had departed. He left his disciples behind, exhorting them to become witnesses. First to Jerusalem. Then to the surrounding area. Ultimately, to the world.

Notice that Our Lord leaves after he presses the nascent Church to become a witness – a witness to the wondrous deeds that Jesus Christ accomplished in his life, death and resurrection.

[May 16, 2021 –  
Solemnity of the  
Ascension of the Lord](#)

Acts 1:1-11  
Ps 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9  
Eph 1:17-23  
Mk 16:15-20

A witness to what human life can become in Christ.

In ascending into the heavens, Jesus did not depart. He created the space or distance that allows for a new type of relationship.

When you first fall in love, you seek nothing more than total union with your beloved. You want to do everything together. You desire utter proximity.

Spousal love cannot continue that way. Mature love recognizes the gift of distance. I cannot always be around my spouse, and yet everywhere I go, I bring her along with me.

In this case, distance is what enables that motley crew of disciples to become witnesses to the power of Christ's resurrection in the world.

If Christ has a voice within the world, it is the voice of the People of God, the Temple of the Holy Ghost, the very Body of Christ that proclaims God's glory to the ends of the world.

Beloved Church, we can indeed overlook this tremendous gift. Christ is known to the world through our flesh and blood, through our voice crying out in lament and praise and in our preaching the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

We are too often like the disciples in the first moment of the Ascension. We stare passively looking up at the sky, waiting for someone else to become a witness. Surely, that is the responsibility of the parish priest, the lay minister or someone with proper training.

Not me! What am I to say?

And yet, Christ wants to take flesh anew through your body and your voice. He wants the [specificity of your witness](#) – the [witness that you alone can provide](#) in the world as a member of the body.

If you don't speak, if you don't run to the hungry and thirsty and feed them, and if you don't witness to the resurrected

Lord in the marvelous way that only you can, then the Church and the world alike miss out.

We miss out on the specificity of your charism, of the manifold ways that the Word still becomes flesh through the witness of believers.

The solemnity of the Ascension is already connected to the festival of Pentecost. The Church is born not only when the Spirit descends upon the disciples crowded into the upper room but when the Head of that Body ascends into heaven.

When Our Lord Jesus creates the distance between himself and us that enables us to become witnesses.

*Timothy P. O'Malley, Ph.D., is the director of education at the McGrath Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame.*