



If you seek his monument - look around you

First, on behalf of the Ursuline Sisters I want to thank all of you for your presence here with us today. The Installation of a new Leadership Team in this public forum is symbolic of the faith we have in God, in the Church and in the mission that has been ours with you in the greater Youngstown area for 140 years. Our work has been in imitation of that of Jesus Christ and in the charism of St. Angela Merici, the founder of the Ursulines. As I look around and consider all the connections among the people in this sacred space, I can only recite the favorite prayer of workers in the Guinness Brewery who fall into the vat: "Lord, give me a mouth worthy of the occasion."

The history buffs here may well know this: much of the city of London was destroyed by a fire in 1666. Christopher Wren was the architect charged with rebuilding the city, including St. Paul's Cathedral. His tomb is in St. Paul's. There is a simple inscription on his tombstone: "Here in its foundations lies the architect of this church and city Christopher Wren, who lived beyond ninety years, not for his own profit but for the public good. Reader, if you seek his monument - look around you."

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With the whole Church we celebrate today the feast of the Ascension. I have never been to the Holy Land, but people tell me that everywhere you go you see plaques and monuments that indicate where certain events in the life of Jesus occurred. A quick Google search will bring up pictures of the Chapel of the Ascension in Jerusalem, including a picture of an impression in rock of the very last footstep of Christ on Earth.

Much contemporary scholarship makes those plaques and monuments interesting, but less than historical. I think the words on Christopher Wren's tombstone apply more appropriately to the earthly life of Jesus: "If you seek his monument - look around you."

One way to define the church (and there are many), but my favorite way to define the church is the community that keeps alive the life, teaching, ministry, healing, and especially the death and resurrection of Jesus. We do this - we keep his memory alive - in our life of faith together, in our ministry, in our prayer and worship and in loving service especially to the poor and those on the edges of society.

Theologically and liturgically this feast marks two important points.

- 1) It is in the Ascension that there is a convergence of heaven and earth. We believe that the risen Christ ascended to the fullness of the Reign of God. The 1st reading from the Acts of the Apostles promises that Jesus will return to us in the same way. This demonstrates the sacredness of the human body and life on earth.

The image on our worship aids and invitations point to this union of heaven and earth. The Ascension points to our belief that we will participate with Jesus in a bodily resurrection.

- 2) The Feast of the Ascension marks the very 1st novena of the Church. Of course, the "9 days" were more evident when we celebrated the feast on Thursday. Nevertheless, from the time of the Ascension of Jesus until the feast of Pentecost the first followers of Jesus prayed for the coming of the Holy Spirit. We continue to rely on the presence of the Spirit to be with us and show us the way to keep alive the memory of Jesus.

The Gospel for today is Matthew's account of the Ascension. It appears at the very end of Matthew and is often called "the Great Commission."

One of the interesting elements in this gospel is the mention that the disciples worship Jesus when they see him, but they also doubted. These two responses to Jesus may seem contradictory - worship and doubt, but they need not be. When a community of faith gathers to worship, it is indicative of faith and a particular response of faith to the mystery of God. But doubt can companion faith. Doubt is willing to ask deep questions and to risk different insights. Doubt can unsettle us, but it can also inspire a more mature faith.

I think for many of us today, doubt, disconcerting as it is, is part of our faith. Many of us would prefer a "story-book" ending to life rather than doubt, but here we are. Let me offer a few examples:

- 1) As Americans, we would like to think that our government is above reproach and always seeks the good. Even a cursory study of our history indicates that that is not the case, no matter which party is in office.
- 2) Lots of us think that if we are faithful to God, if we live basically good moral lives, we will be free from suffering. We all know from our own life experience that none of us is exempt from suffering.
- 3) Even in the church some of us harbor doubt. More than once I have wondered why the church has been so critical of some of its most dedicated, hard-working, capable and competent workers: nuns.
- 4) Speaking of nuns, lots of people doubt whether there is even a future for Religious Life in the church. Tell you the truth, I don't know the answer to that question. What I can tell you is this: we look to a vibrant future as Ursulines in Youngstown with our Associates and an enthusiastic cadre of young volunteers, some of whom may become vowed members. Through it all, we remain faithful to Christ and his mission.

In times of doubt we need not think God has abandoned us. Like his first followers, we look to Jesus. The disciples of Jesus doubted, but they also worshipped and went on to teach, preach and invite others into the great mystery of God's triune love. St. Angela Merici encouraged her followers to always find refuge at the feet of Jesus. "If you seek his monument, look around you."

As I mentioned, the Ursulines have been in the greater Youngstown area for 140 years. The monuments to the work of the sisters in imitation of Jesus are not found in buildings or plaques. "If you seek their monument, look around you." They are found in the lives of people who have been taught by an Ursuline, who have been touched with a healing word or gesture, who have been comforted by prayer or silent presence, who have been strengthened by these determined women standing with them, advocating for their needs.

While we remember our heritage with pride and sometimes a little nostalgia, this Installation is not about the past. It's about the future. And it is not about us alone. It's about us working and living with you, our Associates, co-workers, family, friends and advisors. In particular in the next 6 years we want to do this by responding to certain directions, not only for ourselves but for the common good. We intend to find ways to:

- Promote holistic living
- Develop our legacy
- Enrich spirituality
- Expand our network of relations
- Practice respectful communications
- Strengthen mission integration
- Promote visible solidarity
- Support gender equality

We pledge to minister in the church to and with God's people in ways that embody these directions. Next Sunday the church celebrates Pentecost. With the whole church we pray for the Spirit to be with us as we live our faith despite times of doubt. We know of God's gracious presence with us in Jesus and his Spirit. We believe that to see his monument we need only to look around.