

Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord – Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – June 2, 2019
Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor

Many years ago, when visiting Germany, I went on a tour of several Bavarian castles. Perhaps the most famous stop on my visit – the castle that’s on all of the posters and postcards – was Neuschwanstein. Built by King Leopold II and nestled in the Bavarian Alps, it is said to have been Walt Disney’s inspiration for Sleeping Beauty’s castle at Disneyland. Public transportation will take you to the royal family’s older, more simple castle, Hohenschwangau, but to reach Neuschwanstein you must either pay to take a separate shuttle or climb the winding road that seems to lead straight up. When I visited, I saw plenty of older people purchasing tickets for the shuttle and plenty of younger, more robust types setting out on the hike. Associating myself more with the latter than the former (I was much younger then), I decided to walk. The hike was beautiful, but not as easy as it looked. I made it, all right, but my calf muscles paid for it over the following few days. It is funny, is it not, that something can look so close and actually be so far away.

Today’s readings contain numerous references to the contrast between the earth and the heavens – between the land below and the clouds above. In two separate accounts – the first reading and the gospel – we see the risen Christ gather with his apostles and then disappear into the heavens. In the second reading, we hear St. Paul describe the work of the Lord God in being raised from the dead and seated at the Father’s right hand in the heavens. We cannot help but be impressed by the distance that Jesus seems to cover, by the clouds that take him from our sight. If I was challenged by the simple walk up the Bavarian mountain to Neuschwanstein, how much more impressive is the distance that Jesus puts between himself and us – so far, so fast that he quickly disappeared from the sight of the apostles. Actually, the image of that royal castle on a mountain top is pretty close to how we often imagine Jesus after the Ascension – the one who mounted his throne to shouts of joy and trumpet blasts. We somehow picture Jesus as just sitting around in the big castle of heaven, waiting for us to arrive.

But these same readings which seem to emphasize the distance between God and humanity also point to a closeness that cannot be measured in yards or miles. The very fact that Jesus has ascended to heaven means that a real human nature – flesh and blood, body and soul – now dwells eternally with the God who created us. How much closer can we get to God? When Jesus ascended to heaven, in a very real sense, so did we. Humanity, after all, was created in the image and

likeness of God. In the person of Jesus Christ – the image of the invisible God – this likeness has been restored. We are offered the same gift that Christ has already received – our loving God offers us an eternal dwelling place with him. We too are invited to that castle on the mountain top – and Christ has already opened the gate for us.

But before we sit back and await our own assumption into the sky, before we imagine that all we have to do now is rest and wait for our heavenly shuttle bus – let's look carefully at the readings again. Jesus did not tell his disciples, does not tell us, to sit back and wait and the bus will be here soon. No, Jesus tells the disciples, tells us to get busy – “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Not exactly a day at the beach. Our faith tells us that Jesus is preparing a place for us, that there will be room for us in that heavenly castle, but we are cautioned against doing nothing and hoping that the ride comes soon. Jesus' human body indeed dwells in heaven, but his mystical body – the intimate communion that unites his believers in the Church – we are still here. We are his earthly body now. Our mission is his – to announce the Good News, to bring hope where there is despair, to bring light where there is darkness, to bring joy where there is sadness. And, if we've looked around our world recently – indeed, if we've only looked in the immediate vicinity of this building – then we know that despair, sadness and darkness still exist. As much as we may have proclaimed the Gospel, it has not yet taken complete hold. Our work continues. And, yes, we pray that one day we will reach that exalted castle, but our close, intimate connection to God continues in the here and now – in the mercy we show to others, in the ways that we equip others for the work of ministry, in the way we build up the body of Christ. We ask for the grace to take these Scriptures to heart. May we imitate the first disciples – not by gazing passively at the sky, but in our zeal to be Christ's witnesses to near and far, even to the ends of the earth.