

Where Do His Feet Point?

- *The Ascension of the Lord*
- *May 16, 2010*
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Let me begin my remarks on this Feast of the Ascension here in the Chapel of St. Ignatius by telling you a story from St. Ignatius' autobiography, a story which touches on the Ascension.

After his conversion and year-long submission to God's Spirit, Ignatius set out from Barcelona in Spain by boat to Italy, walked across Italy to Venice, and sailed from there by way of Cyprus to Haifa and then by donkey and walking to Jerusalem in the Holy Land. He did all of this "moneyless", begging his way, often violently sick, because of a great pious desire to visit the actual places where his newfound Master, Jesus, had walked. In fact he decided to stay there in the Holy Land forever, visiting the holy places of the life of our Lord and secretly hoping to convert the Turks to Christianity. He ran into a wall in the form of the Franciscans who had authority over the Holy Land. They threatened to excommunicate Ignatius the troublemaker, ordering him to get back on the pilgrim ship on which he had come. He decided to obey, but in his own way. Here his autobiography picks up (adjusting its arcane form to the present). He told them:

"...I would obey. This done, I returned to where I had been before, and I was seized with a great desire of again visiting Mount Olivet before leaving, since it was not our Lord's will that I remain there in those holy places. On Mount Olivet there was a stone from which our Lord ascended into heaven and the print of his footstep is still to be seen. It was this I wished to see again. Without a word to anyone, or without taking a guide... I slipped away from the Franciscan monastery and went alone to Mount Olivet. The guards did not want to let me in, but I gave them a desk-knife which I carried with me. After having prayed with deep devotion, I wanted to go to (another place), and while I was there, I recalled again that I had not noticed on Mount Olivet in what direction the right foot was turned, or in what direction the left. Returning, I gave my scissors to the guards for permission to enter.

"...the (Franciscan) Friars made every effort to find me. As I was coming down from Mount Olivet, I fell in with a Syrian Christian who worked at the (Franciscan) monastery. The man had a large staff and showing signs of great annoyance made as though he were going to beat me with it and... grabbed me roughly by the arm, and I easily allowed myself to be led away. The good man never let go of me. Coming thus in the grasp of the Syrian Christian, I had great consolation from our Lord who I thought I saw above me all along the way... We left on the next day..."

There you have it, the first Jesuit, a very pious Jesuit, a Jesuit before having a college education!

Not knowing the direction in which the imprint of the feet of Jesus on the rock pointed when he blasted off into heaven at the Ascension—and if you believe in those footprints as Ignatius did, you’ll believe in anything—he found his big plans for his life turned around. We may not know in what direction the feet pointed, but we do know that the direction of Ignatius’ life now pointed in the opposite direction from which he thought it would go. He went along easily with this new direction, wherever it might lead—without desk-knife or scissors and in the rough grasp of a Syrian Christian with a large staff—referring to him as a “good man” because Ignatius felt himself led away and overseen all along the new, reverse way by the Lord, the Master himself.

“Big plans for one’s life turned around suddenly” sounds like it just might have something to say to students soon graduating from Seattle University. Substitute iPods and iPhones for desk-knife and scissors to bring it closer to home. Wouldn’t we, unlike Ignatius, love to know not in what direction the footprints of the ascending Jesus left on the rock pointed, but in what direction our feet, our life should point? Will it take the modern equivalent of a burly Syrian Christian with a big club to redirect our lives? What will it take for us to allow ourselves as Ignatius did to be easily led away in a new direction and to experience consolation—inner joy, peace, and rightness—in being led along this unexpected way and to have a clear knowledge that our own friend and Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, oversees us all along this new direction of our lives? Pray and ponder this on this Feast of the Ascension of the Lord.

Actually the Ascension itself is a huge redirection of all Christians, a change of the big plans for those first disciples and just as much for us as Christians today. The key point of the Ascension is that Jesus did not depart, but rather that he disappeared. Let me repeat that: the key to the Ascension is that Jesus did not depart, because he did not leave us but is present still, but that he disappeared, and still is not seen as Jesus of Nazareth. Got it?!

The change of the disciples’ big plans and of our big plans—for we would have wanted it and planned it quite differently—is that we are redirected toward where Jesus, the un-departed, has disappeared and to where he is now present. Where do the feet of the disappearing, but-not-departing ascended Lord point? They point to four places:

1. Jesus disappeared into the people and he is to be found in the assembly, in his Body, here in the worshipping, bread-breaking community.
2. Jesus disappeared into the poor where he is present so that whatever we do for and with them, we do for and with him.
3. Jesus disappeared into our prayer, into how we hold ourselves empty, open, and willing to be led away by him wherever he wishes to take us.
4. Jesus disappeared into the promise, into his re-creation of our world and ourselves even beyond our deaths into his final and full kingdom, so we find him present now risen in our hope.

This is the change of our big plans, our turn around, redirected by the Ascension—blessed feast that it really is—Jesus not departed but present, disappearing into the people, the poor, our prayer, and his promise to be looked for, served, and loved there where he is for us.