Reflection: Solemnity of the Ascension of Our Lord
May 26, 2022 (in Archdiocese of Philadelphia)

First Reading: Acts 1:1-11
Psalm: 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9
Second Reading: Ephesians 1:17-23
Written by: Sr. Anne Marie Beirne, GNSH

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.” Acts of the Apostles 1:8-11

The Ascension of Jesus is a difficult feast and idea for me to understand and, I would suppose, for many people today. It called me to do some “research” to get a bit of clarity about what this may mean and how it affects us today. One of my recent go-to theologians is Bishop Robert Barron and his Word on Fire reflections that generally make sense to me because they touch on our lived experiences. Barron suggests that to get an understanding of what the Ascension is about it would be helpful to reflect on the Jewish traditional understanding of heaven and earth. Rather than looking at heaven as an escape from the earth, as the Greeks did, we need to look at Jesus’ mission as a way of uniting heaven and earth in a kind of meeting where the two realms are interacting. “Heaven, the arena of God and the angels, touches upon and calls out to earth, the arena of humans, animals, plants, and planets.”

And how are we to respond to this event? The words of the two men in white robes suggest that we are called, not to stand looking to the heavens, but to get busy uniting heaven and earth. This is what the disciples were summoned to do and I believe all Christians are called to do.

Reflections like this make more sense to me if I can see this happening in real time. So I share with you the story of a woman who, through her struggles and determination, has been working, probably unknowingly, to witness to so many of the uniting of heaven and earth. On this Ascension Thursday I will be in the Bronx at the graduation at Lehman College where my friend Veronique will receive a degree in nursing. Many of you already know Veronique’s story so I will only share highlights- Veronique came here from Burkina Faso seeking asylum. She was referred to me at Marguerite’s Pantry from a counselor at Bellevue Hospital when she and her baby girl and husband were put out on the street and ended up in a shelter in Jackson Heights. With support and encouragement Veronique went on to recently receive her US citizenship, her GED, a job in a Bronx hospital while raising and caring for her two children and now completing four years of college in nursing. Her journey has not been easy, but I know her faith in a loving God has been strong and sustaining for her. She has been a faithful neighbor to a woman who was a victim of domestic violence, an example to her daughter and many others as she balances study with all the other responsibilities, and continues to volunteer at the pantry by traveling with her two children on the bus and train each month.

Barron concludes his reflection on the Ascension explaining what the two men in white robes are hinting at, as he says none too subtly: “Under the influence of Jesus’ spirit, get to work! Do all that you can to foster the marriage of heaven and earth! Get on with the mission of the church!” Amen!