

“Lift Up Your Hearts”

In the name of our risen and ascended Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

You can tell I've been sitting in a doctor's waiting room, again. My opening illustration is from the pages of National Geographic. What I learned in my waiting and my reading, is that the Pygmies of the Congo region in Africa live in very dense rain forests. Spending their entire lives surrounded by trees and all kinds of vegetation. This vegetation is so dense and difficult to keep in check that the largest open space is a pygmy is likely to see is the 30 or 40 yards between him and the far side of a clearing or river.

Consequently, the Pygmies have no real concept of space or distance. They enjoy very little freedom of movement, their world is small and extremely enclosed. Their horizon is severely limited. In such a world even comparatively small objects can appear larger than life because of one's nearness to them.

Dr. Colin Turnbull, an anthropologist who has spent years studying the Pygmies of the Congo region, tells how once he took one of them, a man called Henge, out of the forest and up to the top of a high mountain overlooking Lake Edward. Henge couldn't get over what he saw.

The things that impressed him most of all were the wide open spaces that existed beyond the forest, the immensity of the sky, and the vastness of the horizon. He was greatly surprised at discovering that a world existed in which there were no trees and very little vegetation.

He was like a child in his excitement. “Oh, look at the river!” he cried out to Dr. Turnbull. For the very first time he was able to see its path as it snaked its way through the forest on its long journey to the great ocean. But then he made the classical mistake when he said to his guide: “What are those insects down there on the plain?”

What a surprise he got when he was told that the “insects” were in fact a herd of buffalo. I made the same mistake when I first flew into Scotland. What I thought was little potholes of snow were, in fact, sheep. Henge simply had no idea how small things get when viewed from a distance. He was so thrilled with the experience that he wanted to remain up there. But, of course, he had to go back down to his small, enclosed narrow world. However, Dr. Turnbull tells it, it had a wonderful effect on him. It helped him to take a broader view of his world and his life, especially when things were getting him down and the world was closing in on him.

Above all Henge remembered the river. In the forest he was far too close to it to be able to see either where it came from or where it was going. But from the mountaintop he had got a clear view of its winding path. He learned that it originated in great snowy peaks away to the north and that it entered the ocean, something he had never seen and could scarcely imagine, some hundreds of miles to the south. He came to look on the river as a symbol of his life. He believed that though often his life appeared to be going nowhere, this was not so. Like the river, his life too had a goal, and that goal was what gave meaning and direction to his life.

Dear friends in Christ. Jesus, our Brother and Saviour, lived like we do in the “rain forest” of this world. But, unlike us, he always seemed to have this perspective on his life. Thus, the night before he died, he said: “It was from the Father I came out when I entered this world, now I am on my way back to the Father.”

And yet, it is obvious that, at times, the forest closed in on him too, and there were moments when Jesus found it hard to see his way or to find a meaning in his life and work. When the time came for him to leave this world, as we heard in today's readings for the Ascension, he took his disciples up to the top

of Mount Olivet. There they caught a glimpse of the glory towards which he was going, a glory which he had promised would one day be theirs too if they remained faithful to what he had taught them. Of course, they too wanted to remain up on that hill, so that a voice had to call them back to reality: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up into the heavens?" Even though they had to go back down into the real world, their lives would never be the same again.

Often, as Henry David Thoreau said, "we live meanly, like ants, and our lives are frittered away by detail." We get caught up in trivialities, bogged down in our everyday problems, so that we lose direction and are unable to see things in perspective. It is then we need to recall the vision our faith gives us of the goal and meaning of our lives.

We live in expectation of that goal. We live in the hope that the words of Jesus will come true for us, when he said: "Where I am, you shall be also." Surely this vision, this promise, and this hope cannot fail to inspire us and to light up our lives.

My brothers and sisters in faith. Today, on this the day we remember and celebrate the Ascension of our Lord, the Church invites us to lift up our minds and hearts to contemplate Christ our Brother and ascending to the right hand of the God who loves us. Let us pray for the grace to be able to rise above all things that keep us bogged down, closed in, and enslaved. Let us pray for the human family. That people may rise above their prejudices and see the world as their common home and all people as sisters and brothers. Let us pray for those who cannot see beyond the narrow horizons of this materialistic world, that they may hear the voice of Jesus calling them to eternal life, abundant life, to an everlasting kingdom. Finally let us pray that we may rise above the problems and worries that get us down, and above the grudges, jealousies, and meanness of spirit, which sometimes prevents us from loving each other. Friends, this is the day we remember our Lord's ascension. This is the day we celebrate his triumphant return to God. It is not a day for narrowness. It is a day for openness and joy. Therefore let us lift up our hearts, let us lift up our minds. May our spirits soar and be free. Thanks be to God. AMEN.