

Sunday, May 20, 2012 – Feast of the Ascension
Prepared by Fr. John Barth, MM

Acts 1:1-11; Psalms 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9; Ephesians 1:17-23; Mark 16:15-20

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal and a bottle of wine they bunked down for the night and went to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson replied, "I see millions upon millions of stars."

"So what does that tell you?" asked Sherlock.

Watson pondered for a minute. "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Hierologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you?"

Holmes was silent for a minute and then spoke. "It tells me someone has stolen our tent!"

(Author unknown)

The Feast of the Ascension takes us back to the end of Jesus' earthly ministry and the beginning of ours.

The first reading today is from the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. The reading ends with this question addressed to the bewildered disciples, "People of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?" Sherlock Holmes and Watson were asking themselves the same thing. The philosophical Watson noticed the stars and pondered their significance. But Holmes asked the obvious question: Where did our tent go?

A few years ago I worked with some pretty poor people in Cambodia, where annual per capita income averages \$300. Many of the folks with whom I worked looked up at the stars each night through the holes in their roofs, when they were lucky enough to have a roof. Thousands of children in Cambodia still live on the streets, having lost parents to war or diseases like AIDS. Their futures have been stolen away from them at an early age.

At Maryknoll's Little Sprouts Program, where I worked, our staff cared for vulnerable children with HIV. Coming home after work, I read the news and tried to understand how so many men and women back in the United States managed to steal the tent while we were all sleeping. The theft of Holmes' tent was nothing compared to the theft of billions by already wealthy people while the country slept.

Like Watson, I ponder the significance of how millions of people around the world, including in the United States, are now suffering because of other's greed. Like Holmes I look at the practical too: how a stagnant Western economy sends ripples around the world. Understandably, while some in the U.S. are still suffering the effects of the ongoing economic downturn, they have simply stopped buying stuff. As a result, factories in Phnom Penh had to stop making the stuff, and tens of thousands of young Cambodian women lost their 28-cent-an-hour jobs and returned to their villages worried about their future, with no unemployment benefits to ease the pain.

Those of us who managed projects in health care, education and social development worried about the likelihood of decreasing budgets from donors in Europe and North America. Would we have to decide between food and medicine and school fees – which one(s) to cut? What started as a ripple from Wall Street grew to a tsunami on Monivong Boulevard (“Main Street” in Phnom Penh), and many still feel the impact.

Working with some of the world’s poorest folks taught me that I have something that the investment bankers in Manhattan will never have: I have enough.

“People of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?” I could have wished upon a star that programs like Little Sprouts would not have to fold – that they would confidently continue to be good news for the poor. Though, instead of looking in the sky for answers, we confidently go about writing new chapters in the book we call the Acts of the Apostles, started on that day Jesus turned things over to us his disciples. With gratitude I continue to write to the many Maryknoll supporters who support our apostolic works when they themselves have lost so much.

This reflection was originally published in 2009.

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