

Ascension Sunday: The Presence of Absence¹
Sunday, May 24, 2020

I

Well, as you probably know, last Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension. So let's think about that story told by Luke in our reading from Acts this morning.

See there they are ... gazing upward as Jesus floats out of sight. And I bet there was more confusion, and more lostness in that scene than any real joy at His leaving. 'Cause for forty days they'd basked in Jesus' company again, had seen Him alive again after they thought He was dead. He'd fed them, and prayed over them, and loved them, and taught them ... and now, maybe 'cause they'd had Him again after they thought they'd lost Him, maybe this was – in a way – even worse than the crucifixion, crueler than that first letting go, 'cause now He was being snatched from them again ... and this time for good – a wrenching nightmare of loss to live through ... all over again.

And as they return now to their bereft, anxious lives, it's a time of waiting and praying. And you know – when you think about it for a minute – here we are still ... waiting and praying. You and I come to church – well, when we can come to church, this morning, just virtually – but we come to church one way or another, week in, week out ... and to be honest, we probably do baffle our unchurched friends, don't we? I mean, they probably just can't fathom why we do this ... week after week.

But here's the thing. And I'll just speak for myself but maybe for you too. I do suspect that maybe those of us who do it over and over again begin to count on it. 'Cause I think this is how we learn where we fit. I mean, this is how we locate ourselves “between the past and the future, between our hopes and our fears ...” This is how we get our bearings. This is how we learn who we are and what we're supposed to be doing; by coming together ... when we can, but now in Spirit ... coming together to pray, to sing maybe, to be silent and to be still, by “peering into the darkness together” and telling each other what we see when we do.

And yes, I suppose we do baffle our unbelieving friends. But I wonder. 'Cause I think half the time ... maybe ... we also baffle ourselves, proclaiming good news – when the news is so bad; trusting the light – when the night's so dark; continuing to wait on the savior in our midst – when all the evidence suggests He packed up and left a long, long time ago.

See, to be theologically correct, I guess we've been waiting ever since that first Ascension Day, when Jesus led his disciples to a mount called Olivet – just outside of Jerusalem ... spoke to them for the last time, and then vanished in a cloud ... His shape fading into the fog, like the end of a dream too good to be true. And then the scholars tell us that He went to Heaven ... maybe not up, exactly ... as much as beyond. They say Jesus took flesh and blood into that holy place for the first time – paving the way for you and me to follow.

Now I bet our unbelieving friends see that as all pretty abstract ... pretty remote from their day-to-day lives. But I disagree. 'Cause when you get right down to it, I think almost everything that happened to Jesus makes sense in terms of my own life. I mean, He was born to a human mother; so was I. He ate and drank and slept at night; so do I. He loved folks and got angry with folks and forgave folks; so do I. He cried; me too. He died; I will too. And He rose from the dead; and I even know something about that. I mean, I've had a few Easter moments of my own – deep joy despite sorrow, life in the midst of death.

But ascending into heaven to be seated at the right hand of God? Now there I'm afraid Jesus leaves me in the dust. And so ... I wonder ... maybe we wonder ... whether we have been left behind. Maybe that's really the one reason, beneath all the other reasons, the main reason why you and I are here – virtually – this morning and together in community just as soon as we can be.

Maybe you and I are here one way or another to find that Holy Presence we've been missing ... in His absence.

II

But you know ... thinking about it ... sometimes I think maybe absence is underrated. It's not nothing, after all. It's something; a sharper feeling, a finer sight. I mean, when someone we love is gone, I think you and I become clearer than ever what they mean to us. Like when my Dad got very sick and then he died ... all that he meant to me in my life became so crystal clear. You know ... you see virtues you may have overlooked. And the quirks that really drove you crazy at close range, become endearing at a distance. And from that wider view, I think you and I can see that these quirks are the very things that make our someone ... someone, and not just ... anyone.

And I think maybe there's also something else that happens during an absence. If the relationship is strong and true, the absent one has a way of becoming present – if not in body, than in mind and spirit. And I also think there's one other thing for sure! There's no sense of absence where there's been no sense of presence. 'Cause I think what makes absence really hurt, what makes it ache, is the memory of what used to be there but is no longer.

Someone has said that “absence is the child's room, now empty and hung with silence and dust.” Said “absence is the overgrown lot where the old house once stood, that house where people laughed and thought their joy would last forever.” Said absence is the empty chair at the table where that loved one used to sit and smile at you over breakfast coffee.

See, you can't miss what you've never known, which makes your sense of absence – and especially your sense of God's absence – the very best proof I think that you ... that I ... knew God once, and that we'll know God again.

III

See, what I'm trying to say is this. There is loss in absence. But I think there's also hope ... because what happened once can happen again. And so I think ... like a band of forlorn followers, it's our sense of God's absence that brings us to church – one way or another – brings us to return to this Mt. Olivet over and over, in search of God's presence.

Finally – in Luke's story we heard in Acts this morning, the angel asks, “People of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” Better you should look around instead, at each other, at the world, at the ordinary people in your ordinary lives. 'Cause till Kingdom comes, that's where you're gonna find Him – not the way you used to know Him, but the new way; not in His old body, but in your own bodies – the risen Lord, no longer anywhere on earth ... but everywhere instead.

And no one standing around watching them that day could have guessed what an astounding thing happened when they all stopped looking into the sky and looked at each other instead. But in the days and years to come it'd become very clear what had happened to them. With nothing but a promise and a prayer, they consented to become the church – and nothing ... was ever the same again. 'Cause as they stopped looking up toward heaven, and looked at each other instead ... they began to say and do things that sounded and looked like Him. And whenever two or three of them got together, it was always as if there was Someone else in the room they couldn't see – that strong presence of the absent One, as near to them as bread and wine, as familiar to them as each other's faces.

So here you and I are, living in what's been called "the time of the significant pause," our pause in time, waiting and praying. And in this meantime, we come to church to seek the Lord's presence, to sing and to pray, to be silent and to be still, to hold out the "empty cups of our hands" and to be filled with bread and with wine, and always with the abiding Presence of our absent Lord ... till He comes again.

So. Do you long for assurance that you've not been left behind? Then why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Look around you instead. Look around you. And give thanks!

Amen.

1. Resources used: Barbara Brown Taylor's "Looking Up Toward Heaven" in *Gospel Medicine*; William Willimon's *Acts* (Interpretation series); Synthesis for Ascension Sunday, 2020.