

Living with an "Absent" Presence
Delivered Sunday, June 5, 2011 (Ascension)
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Acts 1: 6-14

Easter came so late this year that I imagine many of you would be surprised to realize that we are still in the season of Eastertide! In the wisdom of the liturgical year, Easter is not just a day – but a season of fifty days – in which we are invited to absorb the good news of resurrection over a period of time. The testimony of the gospels is that after Jesus was raised from the dead, he appeared to the disciples – not only on Easter morning, but also afterward – for breakfast on the beach, along the Emmaus Road and in the breaking of bread, on the mountain where he commissioned them to go into the world serving in his name. The very last of these resurrection appearances, recorded by Luke includes the Ascension. Luke both closes his gospel, and opens the Acts of the Apostles with a variation of this same moment: Jesus' final words of blessing and a most mysterious scene as Jesus is taken up into heaven.

Our scripture reading this morning shows Jesus slipping through the embrace of those who loved and knew him best – for the last time. Jesus had told them to wait for the gift of the Spirit which was soon coming, but their question pushed for more information. "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?" That was the question on everyone's mind. The risen Christ gave two responses. First, he said, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons." Secondly, he promised, "But you shall receive power to be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." And then he disappeared for good.

One moment he was there with them, talking to them in person, the familiarity of his voice ringing in their ears. The next moment, his well-known hand was raised in final blessing and good-bye, his face swallowed up in the light of the sun as their upturned glances squint after him, his feet wrapped in the clouds which carry him away. His risen, bodily presence was no longer there for them, no longer present but a thing of the past, a mere memory that would linger with them until the end of their days. The Ascension of the Lord is the day the visible Christ became absent. It is the culmination of Jesus' continued leave-taking since Easter, and it gives way to a time of waiting for the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost.

It appears from our scripture that the Ascension renders the disciples speechless, their necks arched back toward the heavens wondering, what do we do now? But God doesn't just leave them there. Two men in white robes appear, (those are Luke's code words for angel messengers) and remind them what Jesus said all along: – "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up, will come again." (I think that's now October 21st since it didn't happen in May!) What we remember and celebrate over and over again during this season of Easter is

that death is not the end. The Ascension proclaims more loudly than ever that the physical absence of Jesus does not bring an end to his presence. Indeed, it enlarges it. The risen Christ, who had a small following in and around Jerusalem, ascends to become Lord of all creation. The One who was bodily present to a few leaves them in order to become spiritually present everywhere.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote about the Ascension: "Sometimes I think absence is underrated. It is not *nothing* after all. It is something: a heightened awareness, a sharpened appetite, a finer perception. When someone important to me is absent from me, I become clearer than ever what that person means to me. Details that got lost in our togetherness are recalled in our apartness, and their sudden clarity has the power to pry my heart right open. I see the virtues I have overlooked, the opportunities I have missed. The quirks that drove me crazy at close range become endearing at a distance. From that enlarged perspective, I can see that they are the very things that make my someone *someone* and not just anyone." (1)

I think many of us can resonate with Taylor's words, particularly after we, like those disciples, have lost someone very dear to us. Had there been no meaningful presence, there would be no sense of absence and longing. What makes the absence of someone we have loved hurt, what makes it ache, is the memory of what used to be there, but is no longer. There is loss in an absence, to be sure, but there also can be, oddly enough, a sort of "absent presence." It is often an experience that is nearly impossible to put into words, and I have few words to describe this from my own life, or the stories I have heard others tell, other than to say that it is what I have come to know as an experience of resurrection.

When Jesus was swept up in that cloud, those disciples came to understand that their relationship with him was not over and done with, once and for all. No, rather, it took on a whole new dimension. When he was no longer the visible, tangible presence they had come to depend on, suddenly he was alive in and thorough them, empowering them to venture forward in faith and discipleship. His absence left space in their hearts and in their lives that could be filled up with something no less wonderful.

Robert McAfee Brown, distinguished theologian, once shared a very personal story about – how he felt after his beloved colleague and mentor on the faculty at Union Theological Seminary in New York, David Roberts, died. "I believe in the communion of the saints," he said. "This, more than anything else has taken away the sting of David's death, insofar as that is possible... The occasional sense of communion I had with David in his former life has been replaced by an almost piercing sense of his nearness in his new life. The fact that we are no longer related at particular points in time somehow means now that we can be related at every point, at all times. I used to be conscious of him in his office or his classroom or as he sat in chapel – now I am conscious of him in my office, in my classroom, as I sit in chapel. I do not mean this in any ghostly sense; I lay claim to no visions. I mean that my relationship with David has incredible new dimensions... I have the strange and wonderful feeling that I get to know him better each day, and that far from his death

diminishing his influence over my life, his death means that his true and lasting influence has just begun.” (2)

I think this notion of an absent presence is what those angel messengers were saying to Jesus’ disciples as they watched the soles his feet rise into the sky above their heads. Jesus would never be with them again as they had experienced him here on earth – either during his life, or through his resurrection appearances. Those personal encounters had to come to an end. But that did not mean he was no longer with them. Even in his apparent absence, he was present in an altogether new and wonderful way – not only for them, but also for us.

Between Easter and Pentecost, perhaps it wasn't until Jesus was absolutely gone that there was room for the Spirit to fill up the people and set them on fire for being the church. Because when you read the Bible and see what happened, you realize it was not until *after* Jesus has ascended that his listeners – became preachers, the converts became missionaries, the healed became healers, and the ones who had been fed by his hand began distributing food. It wasn't until after that little cloud carried the Lord away, and the disciples could not cling to him any longer, that their hands were freed to do his work. By his absence among those few disciples, suddenly his presence became available wherever two or more were gathered in his name, and his witnesses began to take the good news of his life, death and resurrection to the far ends of the earth.

When those disciples stopped looking up into the heavens where Jesus had disappeared, after a while they had no choice but to lower their gaze and to start looking around, to look into the eyes of one another, to look into the needs of a hurting world, to look into faces of those who had not heard anything about Jesus, and to tell them what they had seen and heard. Jesus told them, and today I believe he tells us, to live in the hope that the full reign of God will come in due time. But in the meantime, we are filled, and surrounded by, and empowered by his absent presence.

AMEN.

NOTES

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, Gospel Medicine, p. 76-77.
2. Robert McAfee Brown, *The Pseudonyms of God*, (Westminster Press, 1972), pages 158-159.

Cf “Living in the Midst of Absence” 5/19/1996, North Decatur, some biblical insight and illustration reused.