

May 4, 2008

Ascension of Our Lord (Seventh Sunday of Easter)

Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

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LEFT BEHIND

Maybe it happened to you in a big store: a K-Mart, a Wal-mart, a Target. Or perhaps it was Mall of America, O'Hare Airport, Wrigley Field. You were a little kid in a big place. And you get separated from your parents. So you start walking. You look up and down. You retrace your steps. Maybe you end up going in circles. There's no sign of them. You're alone. And you fear you have been abandoned. Left behind.

Ascension is a feast of leavetaking. The Risen Christ departs this world once and for all. The frightened and anxious disciples are left on their own. Even after his death, this more-than-spirit-risen-one ate and talked and walked among them. And now: the final farewell.

It's the time of year for farewells. There are graduations and people moving on to new chapters in their lives. There are always comings and goings. Leavetakings and reunions. Hugs and tears. Just people watch at an airport and you'll see that.

And often someone is left behind. Parents who become empty nesters when their kids leave for college or work. The one left in the house after a divorce or separation. The one left with a deep hole in the heart when a best friend moves to a new city. And the widow or widower wondering if they can go without their beloved of many decades.

Maybe our greatest fear is to be abandoned. To be left behind. To be alone. Maybe that fear is always there, even in the little losses and goodbyes. We can handle some physical pain and some stress. But loneliness? You cry out to the universe, simply wanting someone to hear you, understand you, hold you. Instead a deep, deep ache.

The ascension is about Christ's absence, his going away. No wonder the feast doesn't get much attention. Who wants to be reminded of God's absence? Who wants to be reminded of being left behind?

Yet to know a presence you must also know an absence. To miss someone so much reveals our deep desire for relationship, for connection, for the heartbeat of the universe that we call love. That we name God.

Maybe it is that absence, that hole in our hearts, that brings us to this place. To this community. To a gathering where the presence of the holy is sought, acknowledged, celebrated.

They say that absence makes the heart grow fonder. As much as we talk about the presence of God, it only makes sense when we have also known absence, abandonment, emptiness.

A favorite preacher of mine, Barbara Brown Taylor, says it better than I:

What makes absence hurt, what makes it ache, is the memory of what used to be there but is no longer. Absence is the arm flung across the bed in the middle of the night, the empty space where a beloved sleeper once lay. Absence is the child's room now empty and hung with silence and dust. Absence is the overgrown lot where the old house once stood, the house in which people laughed and thought their happiness would last forever.

You cannot miss what you have never known, which makes our sense of absence—and especially our sense of God's absence—the very best proof that we knew God once, and that we may know God again. There is loss in absence, but there is also hope, because what happened once can happen again, and only an empty cup can be filled.

The disciples must have deeply missed Jesus after he took his leave from them. After he left them behind. Maybe they felt abandoned. Yet they also mysteriously sensed that he was still with them. That his words burned in their hearts. That he was among them in the broken bread and the cup of wine.

And they remembered the promise he gave them: I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you. You will receive power from on high. You will be witnesses to the ends of the earth. You will have a purpose and a mission and a reason to

live.

I think the most vivid scene of the ascension is the disciples looking up at the clouds, their mouths open, their hearts sad, their minds confused. And white-robed messengers telling them: Don't look up. Get your eyes out of the sky. You'll see him again. He'll be with you like he promised. So get down to earth, to real life. Go on ahead. There is so much more to live, to become, to discover, to proclaim.

But before they got down to business and building a new community of faith they were told to wait and be still. To pray for this mysterious spirit, this presence that would empower them for the tasks ahead.

In-between Ascension and Pentecost, and in all the in-between times of absence in our lives, we too wait. And hope. And pray. And trust that we are not abandoned. That what and who we miss is indeed the treasured sign that we are alive, that our deepest desire is of God. And that God has already given us everything we need.

So instead of gazing at the clouds, look around and within. And see that Christ has left behind gifts for us. Not only the longings of our hearts for justice and peace and love. But this community. This water, this word, this table. And the promise of his spirit: present now, yet still to come.