

## **“ABSENT AND PRESENT”**

Luke 24:44-53

May 16, 2021 – Ascension Sunday

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Intro: We usually read the account of the Ascension from the book of Acts (also written by Luke). There Luke says that the Ascension took place 40 days after Jesus was raised from the dead, but in the version of the story that concludes his gospel, Luke skips over that time period entirely, taking us straight from Easter to Ascension. The abruptness seems, somehow, to emphasize that Jesus' followers are on the edge of a big change and an unknown future.

*Read Luke 24:44-53*

The first thing I notice about the way Luke tells this is how silent, almost invisible, the disciples seem at first, as Jesus begins to talk with them about the things he's taught them, their role as witnesses, the message they are supposed to carry of repentance and forgiveness in his name, the Spirit of power he's promised that God would send. Wouldn't you have thought they'd have a few questions? Interrupt him with objections, pleas for him to say with them, maybe some expressions of what they are feeling – love, loss, confusion, fear? It's possible that Luke just omits telling us about their reaction, of course. Maybe he considers it ultimately unimportant to the story. Or maybe they are too much in shock to respond. That would be understandable. Everything seems to be happening quickly. They'd barely had time to accept the reality of Jesus' death when he appeared to them, risen. And just as they realize he's present among them again, he's giving this speech that's obviously a farewell. Their heads must have been spinning. They are standing on the edge of a future they can't begin to imagine, facing changes to their lives and their world that they didn't choose (and probably wouldn't have chosen).

Now, it would be easy to get caught up in wondering about the physical logistics of this story: How did Jesus “withdraw from their sight”? where did Jesus go? is heaven really “up” in the sky? Somebody has apparently said that if Jesus were ascending at the speed of light, he'd only about now be getting to the edge of the Milky Way. I have no idea what to make of that! But we shouldn't get distracted by those questions. Ascension isn't about any of that. It's this pivotal moment when everything changed for Jesus' disciples. Jesus was there, and then he wasn't. Presence gives way to absence ... and they have to adjust to a whole new way of following Jesus.

This is a moment that seems to resonate with our moment. We, too, have been – and continue to be – faced with change we haven't chosen. The future is unclear to us, too. Absence and presence are concepts that seem particularly poignant, after the months of separation and distancing we've been through.

We haven't been together in worship in the sanctuary, passing the peace, smiling at one another, listening to our voices blend together in the hymns. It's definitely been weird preaching to a sanctuary of mostly empty chairs, and with just a couple of tech people out there doing their best to look attentive and encouraging. I have no doubt that it has been equally strange to sing or say the Lord's Prayer at home, not surrounded by the faces and voices of others. But... there is presence in this absence. I know you're there. It's surprisingly meaningful to see the responses to worship and the greetings to one another shared in comments by Facebook users or in emails. It touches my heart to know that our church members and some of our family and friends in far-flung places, as well as people we may not even know regularly worship "with" us. You are praying about the same concerns, rejoicing for each other's joys. Many of you are sending birthday greetings and 'thinking of you' cards, calling each other, checking in. We are present to one another. And Jesus has been with us in these months, even if at times we struggled to discern or feel his presence.

Despite many challenges, we have remained determined to continue following Jesus, being the church. Virtual gatherings on Zoom have allowed us to continue doing the work of the church, learning and thinking about our faith, and working on issues like earth care and racial justice ... present together in this, even in absence, albeit in ways we had not imagined.

When we have seen each other – a few at a time, masked and standing at a distance... an encounter we once might have taken for granted has felt like a little gift. "It's SO good to see you," we say. Perhaps in this time, we have learned not to take the presence of those we love, and the embrace of community for granted. I suspect that I'm not the only one who's imagined how much joy there will be when we once again have a sanctuary full of people singing "Glory to God" together.

But at the same time, I feel a little worry: what if we find it hard to make that adjustment? What if it's hard to feel comfortable in physical community again? What if it turns out that in some ways presence is harder than absence, that being together demands more of us than distance did? What if it's a struggle to accept the changes that are inevitable after any period of upheaval?

Somebody said in our Worship Team meeting the other day, as we discussed what might be different when we transition to more in-person worship, "maybe some of the things we used to think were important aren't going to be as important." I think that might be right.

It's hard to discern what the future might look like. We are likely facing more changes that are not of our choosing. SO much that is painful and scary is going on in our world and in our community and in the lives of the people whose lives touch ours. It is awfully hard to discern God's hand, the Spirit's work, Jesus' presence in it all.

We feel mightily the losses and disappointments that linger in us, and aren't sure how our broken hearts can be mended. We look at the injustices in the world, and ask, "how long, Lord?" We witness massive indifference to poverty and climate change and wonder why God doesn't change

some minds. We are unsettled by cultural shifts of various kinds and aren't sure how to hear what Jesus would say to us in this. In it all, we feel that the church's power to help and heal is small, and fear that our witness might be kind of shaky.

Ascension is this tension between absence and presence. On the one hand, we feel an absence, a distance, in the despair we sometimes have at the difference between the ways of our world and the ways of Jesus. We feel it in the ways we ourselves fall short, too. A prayer for Ascension Sunday says, "we confess that we have not bowed before him, or acknowledged his rule in our lives." (*BCW*, p. 339)

If we are honest, I think we have to admit that this is only too true.

On the other hand, we have Jesus' blessing and promise to be with us. We believe – as Jesus first disciples seemed to – that Jesus is present to us... through the Spirit, in the word, in sacrament, in each other, in the world's suffering, in people's cries for justice, in every act of love and compassion. This is the ground on which we stand when the future is a big unknown and we feel inadequate to face it. In community, we help each other to keep believing it, keep standing.

Together, we remember Jesus instructions and blessing. Let's look again at what Jesus says in the verse we read from Luke 24: We are to be witnesses. We carry Jesus' message which invites change (that's what repentance is all about) and offers grace (forgiveness). We don't have to rely on our own strength, but on God's Spirit. We go with Jesus blessing.

And then, we remember the disciples, silent as Jesus' last words washed over them, facing a future they couldn't know and changes they had no control over. The harder part of their work comes soon enough, but they head into it with Jesus' blessing. And we take note that they seem to know where to start: worship, joy, and community. Worship, joy, community. Amen.

Resources:

"Living by the Word: May 13, Ascension of the Lord" by Benjamin J. Dueholm, in *The Christian Century*, May 5, 2021.

*Book of Common Worship*, PC(USA) 2018