

Ascension 2023  
Rev. Dr. Les Martin  
Luke 24:44–53

In the name of the living God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen.

Isaiah is five weeks of age and I already don't know my son. For the first two weeks right after his birth and then when we were back in the hospital, yes, I knew almost everything about him. Because of the emergency we faced I was his sole caregiver. I could tell when he was about to cry, I could look in his little eyes and figure out what his needs were. Now at two weeks old your needs aren't so great, so that wasn't so tricky. But what was the delight at that time was this sense of knowing him, really knowing him. But I had to go back to work and in three short weeks he's changed. His eyes are more in focus. He's starting to coo and his behaviors, the cues I thought I had understood are all different and I'm missing it. And for all the talk about the bonds between parents and their children, for all the focus on mothers and their children, I'm struggling in vain to find discussions of what it's like to be the dad who has to go back to work and no longer knows his son.

Darn it, they don't tell you how hard it will be. Absence. After my grandma died I kept her sliding closet doors shut. She had been my champion growing up, my anchor in a very dysfunctional family, and when she left, there was a profound hole in my life. So for a long time, as long as I could, I kept her closet doors shut. Not because I was afraid to deal with her clothes, but you see my grandmother wore a very pungent and specific smelling lilac perfume and she wore a lot of it. And as long as I kept her closet doors shut when the day was too hard and the grief was too great and I just couldn't take it anymore, I could open those doors and take a half step in and it was a little bit better. The reality that she was gone. Absence. Kate is longing for her mother to be here right now to enjoy her grandson, but above all, to help out. The consulate has not yet been helpful.

We send our children out into the world to live their lives and we confront the empty hours and the empty rooms, divorce, death, the constant moves in our society to find better employment. Absence. We understand absence, which is why we think we might understand what's going on for the disciples today. Three years of ministry with Jesus. Think about all that we don't have recorded. The hours spent walking, eating, talking, laughing, and then he died, horribly and painfully died. Absence. But then he was back and there were 40 days of renewed fellowship teaching wonder, gratitude and joy. Then comes the ascension. When Jesus goes to the Father, he was going away all over again. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "It seems like the day we were left behind." But seems is the key word here. It seems like the day we were left behind because there's something about the ascension that is not like the absences so common in my life and in yours.

That's evident by the end of our gospel reading today, where in verse 52 it says the disciples return to Jerusalem with great joy. I do not have great joy for the things I miss with my son. The grief is cooled, but after all these years, I do not have great joy that my grandmother is not here with me. We do not have great joy at the lack of rootedness in our lives. Absence simply does not produce great joy. But on the ascension, great joy there is because finally, ultimately the ascension is not about the manifest absence of Jesus. It's better understood as a feast where we celebrate Jesus' presence. Jesus is now present to the Father where having lived a life as a flesh and blood human he continues his priestly work on our behalf. The author of the book of Hebrews puts it this way.

In chapter four verses 14 to 16, very famous, you know the words. "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, namely Jesus, the son of God, let us continue to hold on

to our confession for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way just as we are yet without sin. So let us approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Jesus is now present to the Father. What this means is that we do not have to lose our hope in trials and suffering because although we will all do our part, it's not simply the case that Les will pray for you or St. Brendan's will pray for you, but Christ himself, seated at the right hand of the Father prays for you.

What's more He lived our kind of life, our flesh and blood kind of life, tempted in every way as we are. Now we don't like to think about that. It follows on that he didn't sin, thank God. But we don't like to think about the fact that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are. But it's a good thing because when we are going through the hard things in our lives, Jesus who is present to the Father knows and it's not just an intellectual kind of knowing, it's a flesh in blood, yeah, I've been there, done that kind of knowing. He knows how we have suffered. He knows what we are struggling with and so he knows just what kind of prayer to pray. You see he's not absent from us. He's present to the mercy seat for us. Presence, that's not all. In the ascension of Jesus humanity, us, the very us-ness that makes us us is now present to God.

Flesh and blood, blood type, DNA, strands of hair, present to God, just as it was meant to be from the beginning in the garden. In the kingdom of heaven finally at long last, real humanity, our humanity sanctified in the risen and ascended body of Jesus walks with God again. The curse of the fall, that real separation and absence is no more. Saint Augustine puts it this way, "It's not the word, meaning Jesus, in his divinity. It's not the word that is improved, but the human race which has its origin in him and through him that is the one who receives improvement. Because of us Jesus ascends to glory." Barbara Brown Taylor makes this point even more clear saying, "Jesus has not only brought God to us, he has also brought us to God." And so it is not the case that Jesus is absent from us. Rather it is the case that we are now present to God.

In Jesus, we are back where we had always belonged. Where there is one now, he has led the way so that one day, on that last day, finally there will be many. Presence. Peeking ahead one week to Pentecost we can also say that Jesus is still present here with us but in a much more fulfilling way. Well remember that he had said to the disciples in John 16:7, "It is for your benefit that I go away." Interesting. It was not to my benefit that my grandma went away. There's no sense in which that was to my benefit. So how is it to our benefit that Jesus goes away? Well, again, I said we're peeking ahead. The answer, they say the answer in church is always Jesus. In this case, the answer in church is the Holy Spirit. We have a problem with the Holy Spirit in our modern age. The closest understanding we have of the Holy Spirit, if we're not theologically educated, I think comes from the work of George Lucas.

We turn the Holy Spirit into the force and the Holy Spirit ceases to be a he, a person. He becomes an it. He becomes kind of a warm tingly feeling or our sense of intuition, but that is not what the Holy Spirit is or what he is about. Remember what the New Testament says again and again. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of Jesus, the spirit of Emanuel. God with us, still with us, but in a new way. Luther put it this way, "This is the office and work of the Holy Spirit to reveal through the gospel what great and glorious things God has done for us through Christ, namely that he has redeemed us from sin, death, and the devil's power that he has taken us into his grace and protection and that he has given himself utterly and entirely for us."

Jesus said, when the spirit comes, he will remind you of everything I said and did. But there's more. He's not just a reminder. The Holy Spirit is the actualizing power of Christ present in the world now. What do I mean by that? The actualizing present power of Christ present in the world now. Well, I mean something really simple. During the years of his ministry, when Jesus was present in Jerusalem, he was not present in Bethany. When Jesus was present in Bethany, he was not present in Nazareth, having for

a whole variety of reasons chosen to take human flesh upon himself. He was only one place at one time, but now through the spirit that we are waiting on, something remarkable happens. In the reformation it's known as the ubiquity of Christ. Ubiquity is a fancy word meaning everywhere, all at once. Jesus is present here, Jesus is present in Australia, Jesus is present wherever we go, whenever we go.

Matthew 18:20 says, "Whenever two or three are gathered in my name I will be with them, present. In every faithfully preached sermon, present. In every rightly administered sacrament, present. In every believer exhibiting the fruit of the spirit, which are actually a description of the character of Jesus, present. In every congregation, operating in the gifts for the building up of the body and the witness to the world, present. When we don't understand this, we begin celebrating the real absence of Christ rather than the real presence. Presence. He is here. He is here for you. The famous hymn written by Chatterton Dix says in three stanzas what I've been saying for 14 minutes, listen to the words.

Hallelujah, sing to Jesus. He's the scepter, he's the throne. Hallelujah, he's the triumph, he's the victory alone, hark the sounds of peaceful Zion, thunder like a mighty flood. Jesus out of every nation has redeemed us by his blood.

Here's where it gets better. Hallelujah bread of heaven, here on earth, our food, our stay. Hallelujah, hear the sinful flee to you from day to day. Intercessor, friend of sinners, earth's redeemer, our great high priest, where the songs of all the sinless sweep across the crystal sea, and it gets even better. Hallelujah, not as orphans are we left in sorrow now. Hallelujah, he is near us. Faith believes nor questions how though the clouds from sight received him when the 40 days were over shall our hearts forget his promise, I am with you forever more. Christ simply put is not absent from us. Rather he is actually more present in more places than he ever was when he walked the earth. Interceding for us in heaven he is nonetheless here with us now and so rather than mourning his absence, we like the disciples, soon to be apostles can worship and not just worship, but worship with great joy.