

Ascension Sunday, May 21, 2017**Acts 1:6-11**

Ascension Day! Ever heard of it? Maybe not. It's certainly not the most well-known or popular festival-day in the Christian calendar.

Ascension Day marks the 40th day after Jesus' resurrection. It falls always on Thursday, as it will again this week. It recalls that day when, as scripture says, the Risen Christ bid farewell to his disciples – those friends with whom he had spent the previous three years teaching, preaching and healing; before whom he had died a traitor's death upon a cross; and to whom, after three days in the tomb, he returned once more and was present to teach them again of God's unending love. Then, after those 40 days of reunion had passed, Jesus gathered his friends on a hillside where he left them once more. This time for good; or at least for longer than those disciples would ever live to see him return again on earth.

This week, if you're in the stores, check out the Hallmark Card displays. I'm pretty sure you won't find a single Ascension Day card anywhere. At Christmas time there are plenty of cards that mark the occasion of Jesus' birth. At Easter, there are cards aplenty that celebrate Jesus' day of resurrection. But as for Ascension Day, nary a card will you find. This is understandable, I suppose. I mean, who wants to celebrate the day when Jesus left us and left our world? Left his confused, forlorn disciples standing on that hillside, their necks craned, looking up, gawking toward the heavens as Jesus vanishes from their sight?

“Happy Ascension Day!” Those words kind of get caught in your throat, don't they? Who among us would want to celebrate the day when our best friend left us? When their “presence” was replaced by their “absence”? You might think that, hungering as most of us are for the *presence* of God in our lives and our world, the one thing we do not need is a day to remind us of God's *absence*.

But, I wonder. Might this actually be the one reason, underneath all the other reasons, that we are here today – you and I? Are we here because we have sensed God's absence – in our restless nights, our pounding hearts, our unanswered prayers – and because those things have not discouraged us from coming here, but indeed are what has brought us here, to seek the *presence* we have been missing?

I would say that sometimes 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 my heart is strangely, more deeply moved. I see more clearly the goodness I had overlooked, the love I had taken for granted, the opportunities I had missed. I resolve then to not overlook, take for granted, or miss this *love* when it comes to me again – or when I have the chance again to embody this *love* myself. Perhaps your own experience bears out this truth, that the absent one does have a way of becoming present to us – if not in body, then in mind and spirit.

One woman .. (Not Michele!) .. but one woman tells of her husband's devotion to birds; especially hawks; most especially golden eagles. This woman says:

[[Driving down the highway with him can become a test of nerve as he cranes over the steering wheel to peer at the wing feathers of a particularly large bird. Is it an eagle? Or just a turkey vulture? He has to know, even if it means weaving down the road for a while, or running off it from time to time.

“Keep your eyes on the road!” I tell him. “Who cares what it is? I’ll buy you a bird book; I’ll buy you a bird. Just watch where you’re going.” // Then a couple of summers ago we spent two months apart and I thought I would get a break from hawks, but instead I began to see them everywhere – loping through the air, spiraling in rising thermals, hunkered down in the tops of trees. Seeing them, really

seeing them for the first time in my life, I understood that I was not seeing them with my own eyes but with his eyes. He was not there, so I was seeing them for him. // He was absent – or, was he? // He was present to me.]]

Friends, one thing is certain: there is no sense of *absence* where there has been no sense of *presence*. 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 your beloved once lay. Absence is the child's bed now empty; the overgrown lot where the family home once stood, the house where people laughed and thought their happiness would last forever.

You cannot miss what you have never known, which I think makes our sense of absence – and especially our sense of God's absence – the very best assurance we are given that we knew God once, and that we may know God again. Yes, there is loss in absence, but there is also hope. (This may indeed be the good news of Ascension Day, and our reason for keeping and for celebrating this day.) There is hope. Hope because what happened once can happen again; for, as the saying goes, “only an empty cup can be filled.” It is when we pull the empty-cup-of-our-own-heart out of hiding, when we own up to the emptiness, the absence, the longing inside us – it's only then that things can begin to change.

It is our sense of God's absence, after all, that brings many of us to church in search of God's presence. Like a band of forlorn disciples, we return to this hillside again and again. It is the place we lost track of our Beloved, the last place we saw him, so of course it's the first place we think to look for him again. We have been coming here a long time now, you and I. Haven't we? But even in our experience of absence, it is a good place to remember – to recall the best moments and argue about details, to swap old gospel stories until they begin to revive again (and revive

us again), the life flowing back into them like feeling does into a numb limb. It hurts at first, but then it is fine, and the joy of remembering makes the pain seem a small price to pay.

Remember how, on that hillside, those messengers from God reminded Jesus' disciples that if they wanted to see him again it was no use looking up. Better they should look around instead, at each other, at the world, at the ordinary people in their ordinary lives, because that's where they were most likely to find him – not the way they used to know him, but the new way; not in his own body but in their bodies, the risen, the ascended Christ who was no longer anywhere on earth so that he could be everywhere instead. And so it was, with nothing but a promise and a prayer, those disciples consented to become the church – and nothing was ever the same again, beginning with them. They stopped looking up toward heaven, looked at each other instead, and got on with the business of being the church – the body of Christ in the world.

I guess this is why we go to church, isn't it? We go to church to worship, to acknowledge Christ's absence and seek Christ's presence, to sing and pray, to be silent and be still, to hold out the empty cups of our own hearts that they might be filled with the abiding presence of the absent One until Christ comes again.

Do you miss Jesus? Do you miss God sometimes? Do you long for some assurance that you have not been left behind?

Then why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Look around you, look around.

Amen.