

Christ Church Georgetown
Sermon, Sunday, May 21, 2017
The Sixth Sunday after Easter
The Rev. Elizabeth Keeler

Four days from now, on Thursday, we will celebrate Ascension Day, the occasion on which the risen Christ is taken into heaven after being with his followers for forty days after Easter. This will definitively mark the conclusion of Jesus' post resurrection appearances and the end of his earthly time with his disciples. Ascension Day is one of the seven great feasts of our church year. It is right up there with Christmas and Easter and Pentecost. In fact, it holds such importance in our tradition that one of Christ Church's finest stain glass windows is dedicated to the portrayal of the Ascension. You can see it prominently in the center at the back of the church. There is Jesus rising into the clouds while his eleven disciples gaze upwards trying to grasp what's happening right before their eyes.

These days Ascension is probably the least observed and least familiar of the seven Principal Feasts of the church year. Barbara Brown Taylor notes that this may well be because "Ascension Day is the day the present Lord became absent." And that about sums it up, Ascension is the day we remember that our present Lord became absent and who, after all, wants to celebrate being left behind? Who wants to mark the day that Jesus went out of the world, never to be seen again? Taylor suggests that: "Hungry as we are for the presence of God, the one thing we do not need is a day to remind us of God's absence." (75) And yet, let's notice for a few minutes this morning what is gained in absence.

Looking again at the stain glass window there in the back, let's imagine what directly followed this holy Ascension scene. Eleven faces looking upwards and when Jesus was gone, well then what? The Ascension story in Acts that we read next week relays that two men in white robes questioned the disciples: "Men of Galilee" they asked, "why do you stand looking up to heaven?" In other words, Jesus has moved on so perhaps it's time for you to do the same, stop standing around with your mouths wide open gaping at an empty sky.

Fortunately, the story continues and we know what the eleven did next, don't we? The followers became leaders, the listeners became preachers, the healed became healers, the converts became the first missionaries of the church and the world was never the same. (77) But I can't help thinking that, for the disciples, the real work was learning to know and experience their Lord in a new way – not the way they used to know him, no longer in the presence of his actual body, but now by his working through their bodies. Were they aware that they had become the hands and feet of their master? At some point did they realize the necessity of their present Lord ascending and becoming absent so that He who was no longer on earth was instead everywhere?

All this is a wonderful stage setter for Pentecost, of course, but we're not there quite yet. Today we're contemplating what's to come on Thursday - an empty sky with just a few wispy clouds and what the present Jesus, becoming absent, might mean for us.

What does marking the feast of the Ascension of our Lord and Savior have to do with our lives? We have never known Jesus in the flesh as the disciples did. In all honesty he has always been ascended for us – so does his absence really mean anything at all then?

To unpack this a bit, I'm going to ask that we consider a personal question. What brought you to church this morning? Imagine deeply for a moment, ponder the reasons beneath the more obvious superficial explanations. What draws us in to this place week after week, year after year? I offer that we come to Christ Church in search of something, longing for something, and no one searches for that which they have no sense of. You can't miss that which you have never known – you can't long for that which you have no experience of. In short there is no absence where there has been no presence.

Taylor writes eloquently of this when she explains: "What makes absence hurt, what makes it real is the memory of what used to be but is no longer. Absence is the arm flung across the bed in the middle of the night into the empty space where a loved one use to be. Absence is the child's room now empty and hung with silence and dust. Absence is the over grown lot where the old house once stood, the house in which people laughed and thought their happiness would last forever." (76)

Friends, I suggest that we are not just searching for that which is absent in our lives but for that which we have known. For that which is, in some mysterious way, present and real and that which we have always known. It may be faint or distant but there is enough experience of Christ in us to know that we miss him and that we want more of him. Theologians often suggest that our sense of God's absence and our search for God, may well be the very best proof we have that God exists.

The original question I asked this morning was - what might be gained in absence? I offer a great deal – because while there may be loss in absence there is also memory and hope. Our church was founded in the wake of Jesus' Ascension and it is the ache of his absence that brings us here, week after week for encounters with him again. Thanks be to God for our Risen and Ascended Christ. Amen.

"Gospel Medicine" by Barbara Brown Taylor. Cowley Publications, 1995.