

"ABSENCE BECOMING PRESENCE"

Ephesians 1:15-23; Acts 1:1-14

May 12, 2024

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins
Westminster Presbyterian Church

Most of the artwork inspired by the story of Jesus' ascension shows a group of disciples looking up at the sky with dumbfounded expressions on their faces. No wonder; Jesus was there, with them, and then ... he wasn't. I can't tell from what Luke writes at the end of his gospel or here at the beginning of Acts whether the disciples had an idea of what was coming, or if Jesus' dramatic exit from the scene came as a complete surprise. Either way, those expressions of bewilderment seem about right; everything changed in an instant, and where there'd been this person around whom they had all gathered, there was only an empty space.

Luke doesn't give much hint to their feelings, but this is what we might (nowadays) call a roller-coaster of a story: excitement and purpose, threats and fear, death and grief, resurrection and amazement, joy and hope, ... and now, again, loss and absence. It had to have been bewildering.

How long did it take, I wonder, before these followers of Jesus really wrapped their minds around Jesus's absence, around what it meant that he had "ascended"? How long before they could comprehend how his words and promises might speak to them after this day? How long before they could wholeheartedly take up his charge to them to be witnesses and to proclaim his story?

Clearly, it was not instantaneous. It took two "men in white robes" – who we presume to be angels (messengers from God) – to say, "why are you standing around, staring up at the sky?" just to move them from the spot where they stood stunned and paralyzed. Reading on a little further, we learn that the disciples – who included the 11 and some of the women who followed Jesus, as well as Jesus' mother and brothers - returned to Jerusalem where they were staying. There they prayed; they *devoted* themselves to prayer, Luke says. And they waited. They weren't ready yet to become the community of bold witnesses Jesus spoke of.

After Jesus' ascension, there is a kind of pause. It feels like an in-between sort of time. For his friends, one part of the story is over, but the next hasn't yet begun. I wonder – and I know I'm mixing up the different gospel accounts here - if they were remembering that Jesus said (according to Matthew), "I will be with you always." If so, they must have struggled with those words; this time seems to be more absence than presence.

We can appreciate what this might have been like. We struggle with Jesus' words, too. We often say that "Jesus is with us," but sometimes we feel his absence more than his presence. The ascension story highlights that struggle, that question about what it means that Jesus is *present*. It asks us to consider how his very absence becomes presence.

We know that, for Jesus' first disciples, the post-ascension absence of Jesus *did* transform into a new and different sense of his presence. They became the community Jesus envisioned, powerful, courageous witnesses to what they knew as reality in their lives: the truth that Jesus is alive, still making God's love known and calling people to follow him. You could say that transformation began when the Spirit of God came into their gathering at Pentecost (next week's story!); but I'm inclined to say that it started before, in this in-between time when these people who believed Jesus' words had to relinquish what used to be, so a new faith could come to life.

We'd do well to remember that, when it feels as if Jesus is absent. In a time like that, you can wonder if you've somehow lost your faith, but what if, instead, you look at it differently? Maybe it's an in-between time, a transition, a time to relinquish an old understanding so that something new can come to life, readying you perhaps to experience the presence of Jesus in ways you have not before.

That is essentially the invitation of ascension: to realize that the ways we encounter the presence of Jesus are not always what we have known before, and not always what we expect... but Jesus' love and grace are as alive as they ever were.

I want to be clear here – this is not about *remembering* Jesus. It's not about the *idea* of Jesus, or the *example* of Jesus, or Jesus as an icon or symbol. It's about a present reality, relationship, connection. It's experiencing Jesus' grace that welcomes and heals and forgives, Jesus' love that embraces and transforms us. It's hearing Jesus' insistent call and the sense that his strength holds us up when our own isn't enough. It's confidence that Jesus is near, here, now, among us.

Sometimes we can readily say, "yes, I know that, I *do* experience that." And sometimes – even if we may *agree* that Jesus is with us – what we feel is more absence than presence. But the ascension teaches us about the possibilities of absence.

Absence becomes presence because it pushes us to become seekers. It shows us that complacency is the enemy of a living faith. It urges us out of spiritual ruts and religious routines and holy pretense and received-but-unexamined beliefs. It requires us to be more intentional and more attentive to the ways Jesus is present.

And when we do that, we begin to see that there are so many ways, so many places, to encounter the presence of Jesus in this post-ascension world.

I want us to just take a minute and think about the places and ways we can see and experience the presence of Jesus, if we look and listen with open hearts.

We can meet Jesus in the stories of the gospels – that’s a great place to start. We also meet Jesus in the stories of others who have experienced the life-changing presence of Jesus for themselves.

We meet Jesus at the communion table, as we take the bread and juice ... and also at other tables where there is love and welcome and good food.

We meet Jesus in sacred spaces like church... but we might equally experience Jesus present in a park, in a hospital room, a workshop, the grocery store.

We might become aware of the presence of Jesus when we sing a hymn of praise, or in prayer... or in the middle of a difficult conversation, during a routine work day, at home with the family, in a moment of spontaneous laughter with friends, when trying to make a decision, as we cope with the aftermath of a terrible storm.

We feel the presence of Jesus in moments of great joy in our lives... and sometimes we feel his presence most near in our lowest moments.

We experience the presence of Jesus in the actions, words, caring of others in whom the grace of Jesus is alive: for example,

-in our mothers, and all those who have loved us, nurtured us, taught and mentored us, who’ve shown us what it means to be Christlike.

-in those who serve the least and the lost, care for children and the sick, do difficult but necessary work; in those folks – you know the ones I mean -who always cheerfully turn up to help out whenever they’re needed.

-in people who help us see beauty in the world – gardeners and artists, poets and scientists, musicians and healers, children and all who keep a childlike sense of wonder.

We also see Jesus – if we look as he told us to, with eyes of love and compassion - in people who are hungry, hurting, powerless, struggling to get by, ignored or rejected by others. We see his unjust and terrible suffering reflected in the unjust and terrible suffering of others. We hear Jesus’ call in the cries for help around us.

The awfulness of so much that we see and hear can sometimes be so overwhelming that we can’t see Jesus’ presence. The troubles of the world, and troubles of our own make us doubt it. Here the example of the disciples, in those post-ascension days, can teach us how to go on.

Those disciples seemed to instinctively know that being in community helps. In community, somebody else will always be there to hold hope, when yours falters. In community, there are others with the same struggles and questions. In community, we can remind each other of Jesus' promises and what he asks of us.

The disciples prayed. They waited. They somehow understood that there are times you just have to be patient. They trusted – at least, I think they did, or tried to trust – that God's Spirit would come to them as Jesus promised, and show them what to do next. Now, I wouldn't say that all of us should expect the same kind of dramatic movement of God's Spirit as came to the disciples on Pentecost (next week's story!) but learning to trust the Spirit is a really important faith lesson. It doesn't come easily; we have to practice it, over and over.

The experience of the disciples helps us understand that none of us controls the Spirit, and that the Spirit's work in us cannot be hurried or predicted. Their experience shows us that the ascension was more of a new beginning than an ending. It seems likely that the disciples couldn't feel this at the time, but they were about to find that Jesus hadn't left them after all.

Jesus hasn't left us, either.

Like the disciples, we find that we experience the presence of Jesus – get closer to him – **when we follow him:**

... when we love our neighbors and our enemies

... touch other people with healing compassion

... sacrifice our own wishes for the needs of another... or boldly claim our own calling even in the face of opposition.

Like the disciples, we experience the presence of Jesus by being part of the community that's called "the body of Christ" – here we learn from each other who Jesus is and what Jesus is like; here we experience his love. I don't know about you, but I see that here every day, and I'm so grateful for it. What's more, we get to experience presence of Jesus when we, the church, are being who we're meant to be - the hands and feet of Jesus in the world, letting the love of Jesus move through us.

The ascension might leave us bereft and bewildered by absence at first ... but ultimately it leaves us with the gift of Jesus' enduring presence. Thanks be to God.

*I'm indebted to Terry Tempest Williams' book *When Women Were Birds* for the title of this sermon.