

'ABSENCE' DAY

Listen again to the central moment of the Ascension Day scripture, the seminal event around which all else now gravitates: *"When he had said this, as they were watching, [Jesus] was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."* [Acts 1:9] So there it is. Lifted Up. Gone. Over. Departed. Done. Finished. Desolation. An earthly ministry is now a celestial moment, and it all happens in an instant. In a way, the ascension itself is inserted into the larger story from The Acts of the Apostles so 'matter-of-fact'ly that the great drama is nearly reduced to background. But we must make no mistake, for what is transpiring is no less than a radical moment not only in salvation history, but in the lives of every person who hears this Word, and in the lives of every mortal being who sits in this sanctuary, and in the lives of every spiritual seeker or pilgrim who has ever searched the clouds in vain for the answer, some answer, any answer, to life's mystery and heartache, life's pain and yearning, life's strange unfolding and curious path.

'Ascension' is such a nice, literally uplifting word; a word with such positive implications, glorious portents, and luminous possibilities. Yet it is clear to me that there are countless ways by which this singular event might both touch our hearts and, equally, shake our souls. Some may be thrilled at this occurrence, but I know that I am unnerved. For if this movement of Jesus from earth to the skies is Ascension it is also Absence, and it is disappearance and it is emptiness and it is abandonment. Or so it feels. If, in the aftermath of Ascension, there is hope and fulfillment, I would suggest that there is an equal if not greater dose of longing, sadness, fear, trepidation, anxiety, bewilderment, and, though never really stated, anger. Yes, there is that reassurance given to the so-called "Men of Galilee" -- those who *"stand looking up toward heaven..."* But, really, what *else* would you expect from anyone who has just witnessed the assumption into the firmament of the One who had only recently walked and dined and healed and preached and ministered and prophesied among them? Why *wouldn't* you search the skies for answers, for some sense of reassurance or at least

comfort, in this hour of confusion? Scripture tells us: *"This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go..."* But how can we be so sure? How do we know? Who can prove this? Why should we believe? On what grounds can such absurd confidence conceivably rest?

The author of this scripture is deliberate and intentional in placing the Ascension event on the Mount of Olives, a location that is familiar, close, known and near. That which takes place is not far away, not in some mystic dreamland, but very much in a location and at a time that is familiar and understood. Jesus leaves, not from some distant venue or some incense-filled throne room, but from our very midst -- and so it is in your life and so it is mine. So it is, whether we like it or not. So it is that there shall come a time and a place, there shall be a day or a season, there shall arrive a stage of life or an instance of sorrow or a moment of confusion and despair, when Jesus will -- suddenly, and in a very familiar place -- become absent from you. It will hurt, and our hearts will ache, and we will be dazed and lost, but trust me, it **will** happen. And my guess is that the word "ascension" will be very far from your heart or your mind, and the feeling of absence will literally begin to consume you.

And just as the disciples are left wondering, craning their necks skyward and beyond the horizon, grasping at straws and scratching their heads and searching their souls, so too shall you and I, in ways which likely make no sense to us whatsoever, be left in the lurch, bathed in confusion, hurting with rejection, desperate in our longing, thirsting for those *"waters of life"*. So too shall you and I cling fervently to resurrection hope even as the physical manifestation of that very hope itself is now gone from our midst. Yes, it is 'ascension', but to me and to those disciples, and perhaps to you, it shall also be 'absence', it shall also be sadness, it shall also be distress and suffering, it shall also be that Valley of the Shadow of Death, that dark night of the soul, that terrible descent into the underworld of Sheol, that horrifying darkness of the belly of the great fish. We cannot live and abide on the mountaintop forever, Scripture is clear about that. And while hope is never extinguished, it

can surely feel far off and elusive. For human beings like you and me this is neither a pleasant nor a comfortable experience, but there we stand, gazing up in wonder, searching the skies, all the same.

We listen to this story over and over, year in and year out, and on one level we are reassured, at least in word, that Jesus will come again: just wait, just be patient, just buck up, bear with it. But have you ever tried to sell such a prescription to a person in the very midst and in the very moment of tragedy, or loss, or depression; in illness, or addiction, or heartbreak, or abandonment; amid simple yearning and spiritual hunger? Future hope, that which apparently *is to come*, is not always an easy product to market in a time of sorrow or anguish or worry. We are told by the same author of this scripture to *“stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” [Lk 24:49b]*. But, really, who wants to stick around in a place where there is now no sign whatsoever of such power or such grace or such promise or such majesty? How are we possibly to remain hopeful and steadfast precisely in that hour when, in fact, all has seemingly changed forever, all has disappeared? The earth has shifted under our weary feet and the Disciples are tempted to flee.

On this May morning we can look back on the Ascension Event and see it, from our perspective, as some glorious episode in the life of the faith and as a celebration on the church calendar. We can be reminded that this is an invitation into intentional prayer, into a Novena, the nine days of spiritual “space” between absence and return, desolation and restoration, Ascension and Pentecost. But I assure you, not a one of us who has been through the awful and debilitating experience of having Jesus or the Spirit removed and absent and away and lifted up and departed from us, even for a short while, feels much good about anything, nor harbors any desire to stay put for very long. We do a grave injustice to the frailty and humanity of the Apostles and to ourselves if we do anything less than empathize profoundly with their clear sentiments of trepidation and dread and confusion and bewilderment. And to what do they and we now turn? In their time of apparent spiritual peril, scripture makes clear that: *“all these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer...”*

[Acts 1:14]. Intercession and meditation becomes the fall back, the foundation, and a wise path it is. If, as my Grandfather used to say, *“faith is the wings over the abyss,”* then here we are indeed. Jesus is gone, prayer remains.

I suppose, at the risk of sounding somewhat (though unintentionally) melancholic, we might equally call Ascension Day, ‘Absence Day’. For many, including the Disciples, that is what I suspect it feels like. And so even while glory is promised, and even as you and I carry on with some assurance of a Kingdom to Come, our challenge as spiritual seekers and people of faith is both deceptively simple and yet timelessly challenging, and it is this: we must now learn to live each day, each hour, each moment, in both the literal absence of Christ and yet with Christ ever at the center of all that we do. This is a deep and wondrous paradox, and it is a sacred tension into which we have been invited. We have no other choice but somehow to make our way. Both the burden and the joy now fall to us, here and now, in this time and in this place, faltering and fallible as we all may be, to become in whatever imperfect way we can, that Light of Christ. It falls to us, in the words of St. Paul, to hold fast to that *“spirit of wisdom and revelation”*. It falls to us, in the words of St. Paul, to go forth with *“the eyes of your heart enlightened.”* It falls to us, in the words of Luke’s Ascension Day Gospel, to serve *“as witnesses to these things.”* It falls to us, despite our own doubt and struggles, in the epic words of the Psalmist, to *“Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.”*

This is not an easy task in a seemingly empty and forsaken world. But, really, what is the alternative? For without hope we are nothing, and it is upon that very hope, that stuff which the Letter to the Hebrews calls *“the conviction of things not seen”*, that our faith securely rests.

Jesus is now gone. That is Desolation. You and I remain. That is Consolation. And, in the midst of these intentional nine days of fervent prayer, perhaps indeed the Holy Spirit peers at us just over the horizon. And that may be Restoration.

But we are not there yet.

Sunday after Ascension Day

SCEC

May 24, 2020

In all this, in this hour of both ascension and longing, I pray that we may find the courage in our hearts and the strength in our hands to carry one another forth into that glory and into those dreams which must surely await. ~ ***Amen.***