

Thursday, May 21<sup>st</sup> was Ascension Day – the day we commemorate and celebrate Jesus’ bodily ascension into heaven. In my experience, Jesus’ ascension rivals only the resurrection in the degree of awkwardness and embarrassment it evokes in many of us. Resurrection from the dead is implausible enough – add to that the suggestion that the resurrected Jesus finally floated up and away, like the little boy Pascal at the end of *The Red Balloon*, and the whole story might only seem to become more foolish.

Perhaps. But it strikes me that these concerns pale in comparison to the real question posed by Jesus’ Ascension – why did he have to leave? Why, after the pain and sorrow brought about by Jesus’ death, and the joy that came with his return, did things need to change? How is Jesus’ departing – and so soon after returning – *good news*? What exactly are we celebrating on the Feast of the Ascension?

In one way, it seems the Ascension asks us to understand that Jesus’ absence is good news. To affirm that he is not here, at least in the way he was present to the disciples and others before and even after his resurrection, is to acknowledge that he *was* here, that he walked on earth, that he ate fish with his friends, that he went to weddings and festivals, that he wept real, salty tears at the death of his friend Lazarus. God gave his Son to us, to live amongst us, to walk alongside us, to touch us, to feed us, to speak to us, to rejoice with us, to mourn with us. In certain respects, this aspect of absence can be said of any particular person. Ben Stein repeating “Buehler? Buehler?” is funny because Ferris had been in that classroom before and was *supposed* to be there. In his absence, we are reminded of his past presence. But in Ferris’ absence, there is no guarantee that he will return. It would have been an incredibly boring movie if there had been. Not so for Jesus. To celebrate Jesus’ absence in light of the ascension is to affirm both that he *was* with us and *will* be with us again. “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20), Jesus promises us.

But we can say more. And herein lies another way of understanding the good news of the ascension. For the absence of the ascended Jesus is a guarantee not just of his past presence, and not just of his future presence in the world to come, but also a promise of his presence to us *now*.

It is because Jesus has ascended and is, in that sense, absent, that he is enduringly present, with us always now and forever in His Spirit. The Feast of the Ascension doesn’t precede Pentecost Sunday by accident – it anticipates it. It is true, after all, that Jesus is not here in the particular and bounded physical form in which he took in both his pre-resurrected and resurrected life. We cannot sit down to a supper of fish with him or stick our fingers in his wounds. But it is precisely because the ascension asks us to affirm that Jesus is not immediately present to us in the way that we experience the presence of other persons – who are locatable and approachable because they can be only in one place at one time – that we are able to affirm that he is present to us always, indeed, that he is present everywhere.

Take the farewell discourses starting in John 13. Each of Jesus’ instructions or commendations – wash each other’s feet (Jn 13:14-17), love each other (Jn 13:34-35; 15:12-13), enter into the

Father's house (Jn 14:2-7), be at peace (Jn 14:27), enter into friendship with God (Jn 15:14), the turning of sorrow into joy (Jn 16:16-24), peace in the face of persecution (Jn 16:33) – all are premised on the anticipation of Jesus' *absence* as much as on the precedent of his presence. "I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me" (Jn 16:4-5). These are not like the words of a parent dropping of their child on their first day of school – "I know you'll miss me, but think of all the fun you'll have!" They are instead a promise that what *looks like* Jesus' absence is in reality his enduring presence.

So, Augustine, in a homily on Ascension Day, wrote:

He did not leave heaven when he came down to us; nor did he withdraw from us when he went up again into heaven. The fact that he was in heaven even while he was on earth is borne out by his own statement: No one has ever ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven.

These words are explained by our oneness with Christ, for he is our head and we are his body. No one ascended into heaven except Christ because we are also Christ: he is the Son of Man by his union with us, and we by our union with him are the sons of God. So the Apostle says; just as the human body, which has many members, is a unity, because all the different members make one body, so is it also with Christ. He too has many members, but one body.

Today, the physical person of Jesus of Nazareth is not here to wash our feet. But it is because of this that we can hope to experience the actual presence of Jesus when we wash each other's feet – when we love each other as Jesus loves us. Which is to say that the presence of the ascended Jesus to us in his Spirit is self-involving. It is not just that Jesus is present to us in the Spirit, but that in this gift we are incorporated into his identity itself. Yes, Jesus' ascension is the end of his story in one sense, but it is also the way in which God invites us to participate in that story, to make Jesus' story *our* story. As Jesus told the disciples after the foot washing: "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

In celebrating the Feast of Jesus' Ascension, we celebrate the miracle that, in being loved by Jesus, we are enabled to love others as he did – to be Christs to each other, in the words of Martin Luther. Hans Frei wrote that "perhaps nothing is more miraculous than the fact that ordinary kindness and natural gentleness can be the earthly form taken by that divine love (agape) which is so utterly disproportionate to the ordinary" (Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 136). In celebrating the Feast of the Ascension, we recognize and give thanks that Jesus' leaving us is at one and the same time his coming closer to us than anyone else could be, being not just present to us, but present *in us*, transforming our feeble and piecemeal attempts at loving each other into moments in which the eternal love of God is glimpsed and experienced. Thanks to Jesus' ascension, we can love others as he loved us, because he is present in and to us in the act of love

itself. We love others as he loved us because our love for others is with him, from him, and through him.

Almighty God, thank you that your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things.

Mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to his promise, he abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages.

May we keep our eyes on him, and in looking to him, help us to see the promise of creation and how he is making all things new.

Help us to mourn with others as he mourned, to rejoice with others as he rejoiced, and to love others as he loved us.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting.

Amen