

## Anywhere to Everywhere

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Acts 1: 1-11

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Can you imagine standing with those eleven disciples on Mount Olivet? They were with the risen Jesus almost forty days after his crucifixion—the risen Jesus, in the flesh. He'd eaten with them and he had been teaching them again, almost like the “good old days,” and now they were going back to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus had often prayed. They must have felt reassured, and a bit amazed, of course, to walk with Jesus. But things were about to change, for Jesus was straightforwardly preparing them for his leaving, his absence. As Jesus raises his arms to bless them, he is taken up into the clouds and disappears! How would you feel as Jesus ascends? You're not sure?

I think you may know! Most of us have experienced those strange, wonderful and--at the same time--grievous moments a number of times in our lives. Some of you remember when the youngest child went off to kindergarten: there was probably a sense of elation (for the child's new venture, as well as mom's newfound freedom, right?), but there was also a loss of those baby years and a sign that life is moving on. Or that first time you stood on a diving board (especially a high dive), and courageously climbed up and out to the edge only to be overcome by a freezing fear! It's the same with a graduation, or when you say goodbye at the airport to take off for a place you've never been, or when you send off someone with that last embrace. It's bittersweet.

The story of my husband's great grandmother from Russia is one that strikes me each time I hear it told. Rosina lived with her mother and stepfather near the Black Sea in the 1880's. At age 17, Rosina had volunteered to take her 6-year-old stepsister Mathilda to two older brothers in America, who paid their way. Rosina told of her mother running alongside the train as it pulled out, with tears streaming down her face, throwing up her arms and saying in German, “Ach Godd, Ach Godd, mein kinder, mein kinder.” Rosina and her mother knew they would never see one another again, and they did not. This story, carried down the generations, is a poignant one, for many of our forbearers grieved in much the same way as their brave children left all they knew to set off to a new land of hope and promise.

Stepping from a comfort zone to something new is part of the human experience. It is sometimes called “taking a leap of faith.” And the story of the Ascension of Jesus himself must have been a bit frightening for those disciples, whose teacher and leader was leaving them to “go it alone.” However, the Ascension of Jesus is a story that marked an important transition for the disciples, something that affects you and me, as well. This story is found in both the Gospel of Luke and in Acts. The disciples had been with Jesus, who had been giving them his last instructions. In Luke's gospel, Jesus told them that repentance and forgiveness of sins they were to proclaim in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. In Acts, we hear he says to them, “*you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. . . . You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8). In both accounts, Jesus ordered

them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the power from on high, “*the promise of the Father.*”

Jesus then is taken up to heaven, vanishing from their midst. In Luke, the disciples return to the temple in Jerusalem, praising God all the way. In Acts, we have a different take. While they stood there gazing up toward heaven, two angelic white-robed men ask them, “*Why are you looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.*”

Jesus was nowhere to be found on earth for the next decade, nor the next century, nor for the next two millennia. The angels reinforced Jesus’ earlier warning: “*It is not for you to know the times or the periods that the Father has set by his own authority.*” (Acts 1:7) In other words, “Don’t waste your time on those details. God has more important work for you. “*But you will receive power... and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the world*” (Acts 1:8) Two thousand years later, we seem to yet be looking up, still waiting, still watching the sky, our faces turned upward. But he is not present anymore, not the way he used to be.

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that Ascension Day is the day the present Lord became absent, which might be why we have rarely noted the annual occurrence of this Christian day in the church year, 40 days after Easter. After all, who wants to celebrate being left behind? Hungry as we all are for the presence of God, we don’t really celebrate a day that reminds us of God’s absence.

Or is there really something of this sense of absence in the very reason we are here, worshipping God together? It may be that we have sensed God’s absence – in our unanswered prayers, in our longing hearts, in our waiting for creation’s healing (oil spills and all), and in our hearts hopeful for what God will yet reveal to us. Perhaps those things have, in fact, brought us here to seek the presence we have been missing. (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, Cowley Publications.: Boston, 1995, p. 74-5).

Maybe we have not understood the power of absence. Absence may bring a heightened awareness, a finer perception. When someone important to me is absent from me, it becomes clearer than ever what that person means to me. I see the virtues I have overlooked, the opportunities I have missed, especially when they are not with me. When someone is absent, I may even think of them more. And, as Brown Taylor points out, “There is something else that happens during absence. If the relationship is strong and true, the absent one has a way of becoming present—if not in body, then in mind and spirit.” (*Ibid.*) So as my husband was away on a retreat this past week, as I watered the pansies and filled the bird bath—tasks he usually does—I thought of Stephen, appreciating him all the more, grateful to anticipate his return.

You miss what you have known. And our sense of God’s absence, Brown Taylor suggests, “may be the very best proof that we knew God once, and that we may know God again.” (*Ibid.*) It may be that it is our sense of God’s absence that brings us to church in search of God’s presence. Like the band of forlorn disciples, we return to this spot, this sanctuary, where most of us have been coming a long time now. It’s here that

we recall the old ancient stories here, until they begin to revive our spirits again. We claim joy in remembering the moments of mystery, something of God's presence within our lives, the moments of clarity, in a breath we caught as a glimmer of hope rose from somewhere deep within. These things we remember become kinds of prayers offered to God.

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” the two men in white robes asked the disciples. It was no use looking up. Jesus was no longer with them; he was not anywhere to be seen. He was ascending to heaven, where he, as we say in the Apostle's Creed, “sittith on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” He was leaving his earthly ministry and mission, but not abandoning it. God would send something in Jesus' place, something which would be far better than one man walking the earth. The Holy Spirit would be invading the hearts and souls of people upon the hundreds, the thousands, and by the millions over the centuries. Jesus had to leave, to not be anywhere (not any one place) on earth in order to be everywhere.

Finally, the disciples stopped looking up toward heaven, looked at each other instead, and got on with the business of being the church. And once they did that, surprising things began to happen. They began to say things that sounded like him, and they began to do things they'd never before seen anyone do but him! They became brave and capable. And wherever two or three were gathered together, there was someone else with them in the room, an abiding presence to guide them, give them courage, to be with them always, wherever they went.

It's the same today, of course. Jesus is not in any one place, but he is everywhere because his Spirit is with us and within us! Therefore, people take off on a wing and a prayer to places far afield, just as Sharon and Danny are doing next Saturday with Upwards in a mission to Nova Scotia. Heather Brady, going on college mission trips to Honduran orphans, is being emboldened to view her future with new eyes. Amy Wenninger has committed herself to the ministry with Mexicans that propels her to go to them once again this July. And even as I go to a preaching conference in Nashville this week, I will be bearing an offering from Fairfield for flood victims there, that they might purchase needed building supplies and food. The Spirit is with us in our daily tasks – rocking a baby, embracing a friend, listening to someone's need, making a meal, forgiving a grudge, morning, noon and night—with us.

These are only the tip of the iceberg of gifts resulting from the power that Jesus told his disciples to wait for, the Holy Spirit's power on the Day of Pentecost we celebrate next week. In his leaving, it was almost as if Jesus had blossomed into hundreds of thousands of seeds of heaven, to be sown in all the fields of the earth. Through those eleven, then through the followers who would spread the gospel far and wide, and through this church, through you and me, through people everywhere on the earth, seeds are sown: lives are renewed, changed, transformed, and they blossom!

Do you long for him sometime? Do you miss him? Do you want assurance that you have not been left behind? Then why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Look

around you, look around. Pray with me. *Oh, gracious God. Sometimes we think you are gone, far from us, and we long for you. Yet you are right beside us, your face in the faces around us, in the hands we hold, and with the people we meet. Help us to wait for you. Help us open ourselves to let your precious Spirit guide us now. So give us courage to live boldly for you our whole lives through. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.*