

"Presence and Absence."

Acts 1:1-12; Ps. 47; Luke 24:44-53  
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church  
Rev. David E. Young  
Ascension Sunday, May 4, 2008

For forty days now, since Easter, Jesus has been with his disciples. He has appeared in different ways and at different times. He has eaten with them, taught them, fellowshiped with them. Now he is preparing to leave them. The disciples are left to stand and watch and then wait for the promised power of God to descend upon them. It wouldn't happen right away, but soon!

Jesus had left them once before. They thought they had lost him forever when he died on the cross and was buried in the stone-cold tomb. Nothing could have prepared them for the shock of the resurrection.

Jesus was with them in his resurrection glory, but only for a short time. While he was with them he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures and the meaning of his earthly life, death and resurrection.

Now he is leaving them again. But what a difference between the first parting and this one! Now they are not left in mourning for lost friend, but instead they are given a promise of Christ's eternal love and presence with them. They are told that they now have a mission to spread the good news that repentance and forgiveness of sin are available to one and all.

The purposes of God's redeeming love in Christ will be fulfilled in them as they proclaim the message of God in Christ. And to aid them in this ministry they will be given the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is physically absent in order to be spiritually present.

Before the ascension and especially before the resurrection, Jesus was limited in his bodily presence to wherever he happened to be and with whomever he gathered.

Now he is risen and has ascended and is seated at the right hand of God, a reminder that all things are under his feet - all nations, all governments, all principalities and powers, ... all things.

Because he is ascended we know he is with us wherever we may be. Our lives are lived in the physical absence of Jesus and we are called to make him present and known to all by our proclamation and by our living out the knowledge of God's grace, mercy and love that we have experienced too.

We are the body of Christ in the world. His hands and feet are replaced by ours. His hands are seen in our hands as we work with hammer and nails, soup ladles and plates, bandages and bedpans.

Christ is present at soup kitchens and church suppers, at our dinner tables and around this Lord's Table every time we gather to remember and to celebrate his eternal life and his overpowering love.

Where is Christ present? Just look around. A natural byproduct of faith and of having received God's blessings and the gift of God's Spirit is overwhelming joy.

Joy is the marker of Christian community. Joy overpowers almost everything else. Joy is that quality of being of the one

who knows the depth of their sins and the gift of Grace from God in Christ.

Having our burdens lifted sends our focus upward toward the throne of Grace and we know that we can do little else than raise our voices too in praise of the wonderful acts of God.

On this Ascension Sunday we also live in expectation of Christ's return. We live as those whose loved one is away, but just for a time. Our thoughts and energies and attention are constantly turning to the one who is absent. We think of the joy of reunion, we plan for it, we live with that excitement of not knowing when it will happen, but just knowing that it will happen and soon.

And in the meantime we have the gift of God's Holy Spirit, the Comforter. We don't always think of "comfort" in its original meaning. Originally it meant "with strength", "to give strength to". The Holy Spirit was given to give strength to the disciples in their ministry and daily walk.

In Jesus' presence and then in his absence, the disciples would continue the work he had begun, trusting in the promised presence of the Holy Spirit to strengthen them and guide them. That same Spirit is with us today, with each one of us.

Jim Strathdee wrote a song a number of years ago about the Kingdom of God and our work as disciples. The verses are as follows:

"We're working for the kingdom of God. What we do while we work depends on what we're working for. We're working for the kingdom of God.

"We're waiting for the kingdom of God. What we do while we wait depends on what we're waiting for. We're waiting for the kingdom of God."

As Christ's disciples we are working and waiting for the kingdom. We are called to be Christ's body here on earth, a visible presence and witness to his presence and power and glory.

Knowing that Christ is our risen and ascended Lord can have a powerful affect on us. I do not know what your life situation may be. I do not know the dragons you may be facing or the height of the hurdles in your path. But I do know that we are not facing them alone. We are children of God and because Christ has ascended he is now here, with us in the Spirit, to comfort and to empower, to give us a reason to be joyful and to have hope. I know that Christ will see us safely through.

Thanks be to God that Christ reigns over all with love and grace sufficient for the living of these days! Amen.