

“Presence”

Today our scripture is from Luke 24:44-53, known as the Feast of the Ascension, which commemorates a striking and emotionally complicated moment when the followers of Jesus experience his absence and presence in a new way. If we are not careful, we may get stuck in the mechanics of the event. Where exactly did Jesus go? How far and fast? Did he go at the speed of light? What did it look like? But Luke doesn't make much fuss about the mechanics. Jesus was here; he was taken up or lifted up and he was gone. The focus of the story seems to be much more on the hopes and expectations of the disciples themselves.

In this week's issue of *Christian Century* magazine, Rev. Benjamin J. Dueholm, a Lutheran pastor in Dallas, Texas, draws a reflective comparison between what happened to the disciples at the Feast of the Ascension and what has happened to us during the COVID-19 pandemic. He writes that tending a church through a global pandemic has been a lesson in the relationship between presence and absence. I agree with that. His summary of what has happened is similar to our experience. Initially, there was a time when worshippers were present to him in only the form of a camera transmitting the liturgy to the homes of whoever watched that day. They were there but unknowable and invisible. Then, we moved our service outdoors, and eventually conditions allowed for us to bring our worship

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back indoors with certain protocols, albeit with persons behind masks, no congregational singing, and no handshaking.

Rev. Dueholm writes, “I began to wonder why it now meant more to me to see someone comment on a Facebook post, or to get an email from someone telling me they’d appreciated the sermon, than it would have to see the same person in the pews or hear them praise the sermon at that church door a year earlier. Why was I so moved to learn that the family of a church member was watching from New Jersey when I would have given little thought to them visiting church while in town?”

I can identify with what Rev. Dueholm writes about. I know there is great value in meeting in person and having the presence of each other. But I have learned, and hopefully you have learned in the past year, that ministry can be done in various ways whether one is present or not.

In our scripture passage today, Jesus clearly expects his disciples to do ministry once he leaves them. They are to go to Jerusalem and await the coming of the Holy Spirit. And, rather than just sitting around and patiently waiting around for Jesus to come back, they are to be his witnesses, there in Judea, over in Samaria, and all the way to the ends of the earth.

Jesus reminds the disciples that it was necessary, in God's providence, that the scriptures be fulfilled in this way. He was to suffer, die and be resurrected. He was then to return to his Father. Luke mentions again that Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." The message of the Scriptures is not self-evident; one's mind must be opened to it; and they are only rightly understood in light of Jesus' death and resurrection.

In vv. 46-47, Luke emphasizes the mission to all nations. Fulfillment of scriptures is important but now the new element in today's passage is the preaching of repentance in Jesus' name to all the nations. Commissioning is a regular feature in the appearance of Jesus to the disciples after the resurrection.

John the Baptist had preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus had preached the coming of the kingdom in the synagogues. In the Gospels Jesus continued John the Baptist's preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins. The disciples will continue this work in Acts. The mission will begin in Jerusalem and extend to all nations. Jerusalem has been the center and focus of the Gospel from its beginning. There the disciples will receive the power of the Holy Spirit and will remain until they have filled the city with their teaching. The forgiveness of sins will be preached to Israel first, then to the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit is eventually conferred even upon the Gentiles (Acts 10:45).

Jesus' last statement to the disciples is that they will be "clothed with power from on high." Jesus was sent and now he sends the disciples. The conferring of the Spirit from on high fulfills the Scripture (Isa 32:15; Joel 2:28). Jesus leads the disciples to Bethany and he blesses them as he is carried into heaven. The disciples return to Jerusalem and praise God in the Temple.

What is so beautiful to take from this story is that God has provided a Savior, and those whose eyes and minds have been opened by the resurrection of Jesus and the interpretation of Scripture will follow the lead of the disciples and praise God continually. They do not need the physical presence of Jesus to do his work on earth.

I have learned in the past year that the Gospel message can be taken to people in many ways. Physical presence is not required. A couple of people I e-mail my sermons to each week continually tell me how my sermons help them worship and understand God, even though they live hundreds of miles from me. My mother, who I have not seen in two years, tells me she is blessed by watching my video sermons.

I recently had an interesting comment from my accountant. The accountant we had for thirty years died of pancreatic cancer last year. In January of this year, Ellisa and I met with the accountant who took over his practice. During our

meeting, he asked me how our church was holding its services. I told him what Latimer had done over the last year. I mentioned I was still doing video sermons for those who were still not able to attend in person.

When Ellisa and I met with him in late April to review and sign our income tax returns, the accountant told me he had looked at my video sermon from Easter Sunday. He liked it, especially the personal touch when I talked about my father. I thought. That's pretty neat. I did not have to be physically present with him to preach to him. The pandemic has caused us to do ministry we were not doing before.

We all look forward to going back to the ministry we had before the pandemic changed how we could socialize. Worship services with singing and not having to wear face masks. Sunday school classes and monthly lunches. When Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples could look forward to the day he returned to earth and all the saints would be with him.

But while the disciples waited, and while we wait, we do something. We take the great story of the gospel to others. During the pandemic, we have continued our ministry to others, even if physical presence with others has stopped or been limited. Like the disciples who waited in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit, we have been blessed. Jesus is present when we do things for people. When we work

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at BIMA or other food pantries for those in need, Jesus is present. When we call others to check on them and pray for them, Jesus is present. When we take action for peace and justice in our society, Jesus is present.

And when we come to the communion table today, Jesus is present. There are different theological views on what the bread and grape juice we receive today mean. Some see it as symbolic; others consider the communion elements as the actual blood and body of Jesus. Wesleyan theology is somewhere in the middle, but the important point is that we understand Jesus to be present in our communion service today. Let us take joy in that and take joy in what He has given us through his suffering, death, and resurrection.