Sunday, May 27, 1990
ABSENT YET PRESENT
Acts 1:6-14

One of the more ancient creeds of the church is known as the “Apostle’s Creed.” It is still recited in many Christian worship services. No doubt some of you memorized it. Here’s how it goes:

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the one Holy Universal Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.”

This creed is an attempt to state in a brief form the core or heart of the most essential parts of the Christian faith.

There’s one phrase in this creed that I want us to look at in particular today: “He ascended into heaven.” In the scripture lesson read earlier, we heard the story of what has come to be known as the “Ascension of Jesus.”

Some Christian churches, and especially the Catholic Church, still set aside a day to remember the “Ascension of Jesus.” By tradition, it always occurs 40 days after Easter in the Christian calendar, which means it takes place on a Thursday. Since many of us are accustomed to attending worship services only on Sundays, it has become, for many Christians, a forgotten festival.

But why did the early church set aside a day to remember the “Ascension?” What can this story from the Book of Acts and this phrase from the Apostle’s Creed possibly mean?

Whenever I think of the Ascension, I can still see in my mind’s eye a very large picture that was painted on the back balcony wall of the church where I grew up. It was a picture of Jesus in the clouds — but as I think about it, I never knew for sure if He was ascending into heaven or if He was returning to the earth.

On the surface, the story seems to belong to a kind of pre-scientific age when people believed the earth was flat and God and heaven were somewhere up there, and the opposite of God was somewhere beneath the earth. Thus the Apostle’s Creed speaks of descending and ascending — going down and up.

Now, with our increasing knowledge of outer space and with people orbiting the earth, landing on the moon, and with the new Hubble telescope revealing even more of the infinity of creation, we are provided with a view of the universe completely different from that held by our ancestors. Thus, the idea of the “Ascension” may seem to have little meaning or relevance for today.

However, we should not let the word “Ascension” bother us too much. Nor should we let the worldview of the Biblical writers become a stumbling block. I believe we can begin to

understand the deeper meaning of the Ascension by recognizing that those who experienced it, and those who remembered it afterward, necessarily had to express their experience in the thought-forms and ideas prevalent at that time. If we had a similar experience in our own time, we would describe it through the filter of our own worldview.

Where we have to begin now is with the fact that the disciples and other contemporaries of Jesus and the early church remembered the experience of the Ascension because it said something very significant to them about Jesus and about their own responsibility as followers of Christ.

But what is the meaning of the Ascension of Jesus for us today? To help us in our search, let's first try to describe the experience of the Ascension in different words.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, after finding the empty tomb, we have the testimony of the disciples that they experienced the presence of Jesus in a number of particular times and places. He was with them in one place, then would disappear and appear in another place. The disciples still depended on Him in much the same way as they had depended on Him before He was crucified.

However, in a few days or weeks, a change took place. We don't know if it happened all of a sudden or more gradually. The change was that Jesus was no longer with them in a visible bodily sense so that they could say, "There is Jesus over there," or "Here He is." The early church expressed this change in relationship and dependency upon Him by saying He had "ascended."

Following this change, something else happened. Now they began to experience Jesus as a power or spirit within them and among them. It was as if the power of the risen Christ was now present within each one of them and within their fellowship, instead of being localized in a person external and separate from them. To put it another way, He was absent from them, however, His spirit and power within them and among them was stronger than ever before. He was absent from them yet present within and among them in a new way.

Something else happened. Now the followers of Jesus began to tell others about their experience with Jesus. They began to talk about what God had done through Jesus with a new power and energy that they had not been aware of before.

So, first of all, the early church remembered the experience of the Ascension because it reminded them that Jesus, who had been crucified, dead, buried, and raised again, was now with them and among them in a new way. Before the resurrection, He could only be in one place at one time and was limited in all the ways that we are limited by time and space — now the "ascended Christ" was no longer subject to these confinements — He had become the cosmic Christ. They experienced Him everywhere.
Before the Ascension, Jesus was confined almost totally to what we call Palestine. Two or three times He went beyond the bounds of His small country. His ministry was a local affair. A child born to a peasant woman; a young man working in a carpenter's shop; some men and women began to follow Him and become disciples. For a year or two or maybe three, a small kind of religious revival appeared here and there. But there was opposition from the political and religious authorities.

The opposition grew: a last supper was held in an upper room; one of His closest followers betrayed Him; most of the rest of them, except for a few women, ran away in fear; He was

arrested; a quick trial was held, and He was nailed to a cross and buried in a borrowed tomb. Then there was an empty tomb. Some of His closest followers saw Him again, touched Him, and ate with Him — all this took place in a small geographical area. It was a local affair.

But now add to this the experience of the Ascension. Jesus is gone in a visible, local, and bodily sense. He is no longer only in one place. What He has started is now much more than a local affair. This is Christ who will draw all people, no matter where they live, to God. The power and love of God, which His followers felt when they were physically within His presence, is now everywhere present with those who trust Him. They no longer need to see, touch, or hear Him through their senses to know Him and the power of God that flowed through Him.

This is a large part of what the Ascension means. It is what the early followers of Jesus experienced — not that Jesus had simply left them, but that in leaving them, He was at the same time now present with them in a new way — with power. He would now continue His work primarily through them. They were His witnesses in all the world. No longer did His being with them depend on His physical presence.

Instead of not seeing Him anywhere, they began to experience Him everywhere. In His absence, they began to experience His total presence. They discovered He was now with them wherever they were, in prison or in the Roman arena facing death.

Note secondly that the Ascension reminds us that in someone's absence, we can begin to see and understand them in a fresh way. This sounds like a contradiction, so let me explain.
It often takes distance in time as well as in space to give us perspective. If we are always very close to an event or person, we cannot always see that event or person most clearly.

When Lincoln's Gettysburg address was first spoken, it was characterized in some American newspapers as a cheap political harangue that desecrated the soldiers' graves, but distance now has helped us see it more clearly.

Jesus said more than one time to His disciples, "What I am doing now you do not understand, but afterward you will understand." How true that is of much of life. There are so many things we cannot truly understand while we are in the midst of them or when we are so close to them. It's something like looking at one tiny part of a large map very close without being able to see what is all around it. It doesn't make much sense until you back away and then see the small part in the perspective of all the rest of the map around it.

Jesus had been with His disciples for several years in a very close and intimate relationship. He had tried to show them and tell them in many different ways that He and God were intimately related. He wanted them to understand if they knew Him, they would know God also, but they did not get it. At the Last Supper, in frustration, Philip said, "Show us God and we will be satisfied."

Jesus answered, "Have I been with you so long and yet you do not know me, Philip?" In other words, being present with each other, no matter how intimate the relationship, does not reveal to us all there is to know about each other. In fact, the more experience in living we have, the more we come to know and sense that closeness grows in continuous interplay between presence and absence, between intimacy and distance.

In absence, in distance, in memory, we can come to see each other in a new way; we are less distracted by each other's idiosyncrasies, and we are better able to see and understand each other's inner core. In memory, we are able to be in touch with each other's spirit.

Jesus knew this and said to His disciples, "It is to your advantage that I go away;" and He went on to explain that once He was gone, they would come to experience Him and know Him in a manner not possible before.

We all know, of course, that memory can also distort, falsify, and is subject to selective perception. But memory can also clarify, purify, and bring into focus. Has it not been your experience, as it has mine, that only after I was gone from the home where I grew up did I truly begin to appreciate it for what it was? Then I saw it in a different light.

When a mother and father think of their children who have left home; when a child remembers his or her parents; when a husband and wife call each other to mind during periods of absence; when friends recall their friends; it is often the very best that is called forth, and it is the real beauty of the other that breaks forth into consciousness.

Note thirdly, that the absence of Jesus was also necessary if His followers were to have their freedom and responsibility safeguarded. The testing of their faith required His absence. Their patience and fidelity could not be adequately measured unless He was gone from them.
If they are to learn to carry their own cross, they had to do it when He was not there. If they are to bear the burdens of others, sweating and agonizing under the load, Jesus must not be so near, so immediately available, as to provide an easy escape. The Ascension of Jesus is for their sake and ours.

The good news is that the disciples discovered, and we can discover, that although Christ was absent in the usual sense of their having known Him, He was and is very much present in the task itself.

Furthermore, it was only when Jesus was gone from them in a physical sense that His followers were able to see Jesus in other people. Jesus is present in the stranger, the neighbor, and the enemy whom we are commanded to love. They discovered, and we can discover, that now Christ comes to us in the guise of children, of the hungry, the homeless, and the neighbor in need next door. Now they truly understood what Jesus meant when He said, "As you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me." Although Jesus is absent in one way, He is even more present among us in other ways.

And there's one more point to be made. It wasn't until the Ascension, until Jesus was physically absent from the disciples, that they got to work on their own. Had He stayed with them as a visible presence, it might never have occurred to them that they were now Christ's eyes, Christ's hands, and His feet. They were to be the "body of Christ" even as the church today is to be the "body of Christ."
We know how this works out in our human relationships. Ascensions have to take place. Until young people get out on their own where they are not in the visible and physical presence of their parents and where they are not able to rely on their parents for every little decision and need, it is first then that they really begin to mature and to become individuals in their own right. Oftentimes, it is only then that they begin to feel free enough to put to use what they have learned from their parents. And so the parents are absent yet present in a new way. It is not until then that the parents also begin to see their children as mature adults who can make it on their own.

And in the other relationships of life, sometimes the individuals who are the center of things have to get out of the center for a time so that the others around them can get to work and discover they have abilities and gifts that are valuable. Then they usually begin to put to use what they have learned from the one who was in the center. So that person who was in the center is absent yet present in a new way.

The Ascension reminds us that sometimes God seems to disappear in order to put us on our own. God wants persons, not puppets. And yet God never leaves us completely alone. Even when God is absent, God is present. Amen.