Sunday, May 19, 1996
NECESSARY ABSENCE
Acts 1:6-14

One of the most ancient creeds of the church is known as the Apostle's Creed. It is still recited in many Christian worship services. Perhaps 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 sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Universal Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen."

Although called the "Apostle's Creed," scholars are quite certain that the apostles did not write it. It came into use as part of a ritual for the baptism of early converts to the Christian faith, summarizing the core of the most essential elements of the Christian belief.

There's one phrase in the creed I want us to consider today: "He ascended into heaven." This phrase is based on the story written by Luke in what we call the Book of Acts, or the Acts of the Apostles.

On the Christian liturgical calendar, there's a day called "Ascension Day," commemorating this event. By tradition, it occurs 40 days after Easter Sunday, which places it on a Thursday. Since most Christian congregations do not regularly worship on Thursdays, it has become a forgotten festival for many. In summary, the story tells us that 40 days after Easter, Jesus gathered His disciples, gave them final instructions, and then disappeared into the clouds.

But why did the early church set aside a day to remember the ascension? What can this story from Acts and this phrase from the Apostle's Creed mean for us in our daily lives?

I don't know about you, but when I think of the ascension, I can still picture the large painting in the church where I grew up. It showed Jesus leaving the earth and ascending into the clouds.

On the surface, the story seems to belong to a pre-scientific age, when people believed the earth was flat and that God and heaven were somewhere "up there," while hell was somewhere below the earth. Thus, the Apostle's Creed speaks of descending and ascending.

Now, with our increasing knowledge of space and the universe, and with astronauts orbiting the earth and landing on the moon, we have a new understanding of the immensity of creation. At first glance, the idea of the ascension might seem to have little relevance for today.

However, we should not let the word "ascension" trouble us too much. Nor should we allow the worldview of the biblical writers to become a stumbling block. We can begin to understand the deeper meaning of the ascension by recognizing that those who experienced it and those who remembered it afterward expressed their experience through the thought forms and ideas of their time. If we had a similar experience today, we would describe it through the lens of our own worldview.

The disciples and other contemporaries of Jesus remembered the experience of the ascension because it said something significant to them about Jesus and their responsibility as His followers. It also revealed something about their daily lives, especially in relation to others.

To help us understand what the idea of the ascension means today, we need to consider the context:

After the death and resurrection of Jesus — after discovering the empty tomb — the closest followers of Jesus testified that they experienced His presence at particular times and places. He would be with them in one place, then disappear, only to appear in another. As a result, the disciples continued to depend on Him as they did before His death.

But eventually, a change occurred. Jesus was no longer with them in a visible, bodily sense. They could no longer point and say, “There is Jesus.” The early church expressed this change by saying He had “ascended.”

Following this change, something else happened. The disciples began to experience Jesus as a power or spirit within and among them. The power of the risen Christ was now present within each of them instead of being localized in a person outside of them.

In other words, Jesus was absent physically, but His spirit and presence within them were stronger than ever.

The early church remembered and celebrated the ascension because it reminded them that Jesus, who had been crucified, dead, buried, and raised again, was now present with them in a new and expanded way. Before the resurrection and ascension, Jesus could only be in one place at a time and was limited by the same constraints of time and space as we are. But the ascended Christ was no longer subject to those limitations — He had become the cosmic Christ, experienced everywhere.

Before the ascension, Jesus’ ministry was local, confined to a small geographical area. But now, what began as a local affair had become something much more. This was the Christ of God, who would draw all people to God, regardless of where they lived or what their background was. The power and love of God, which His followers had felt in His physical presence, was now present everywhere.

This is part of what the ascension means. It’s what the early followers of Jesus experienced — not that Jesus had simply left them, but that in leaving them, He was now present with them in a new way. They were to be His witnesses throughout the world.

Instead of not seeing Him anywhere, they began to experience Him everywhere. In His absence, they experienced His total presence. They discovered that He was with them in power wherever they were — on the road, in prison, or facing death.

There’s a larger principle at work here that is still true today. The ascension tells us that in someone’s absence, we can often see and understand that person in ways we couldn’t before.

This might sound like a contradiction, but let me explain. It often takes distance in time and space to give us perspective. When we are too close to an event or person, we cannot see them in the same way we can from a distance.

Jesus often said to His disciples, “What I am doing now you do not understand, but later you will.” That’s true of much of life. There are many things we cannot understand fully while we are in the midst of them.

Jesus’ absence was necessary for His followers to fully mature in their faith. Without His physical presence, they had to rely on their own strength, test their faith, and carry their own crosses. His absence gave them the freedom and responsibility to act in love on their own.

The ascension also allowed the disciples to realize that they were now Christ’s hands, feet, eyes, ears, and mouth. They were to be the body of Christ, just as the church today is the body of Christ.

In our human relationships, ascensions happen all the time. Parents, for example, need to step back so that their children can grow into their own responsibility and maturity. Similarly, leaders sometimes need to move aside so that others can discover and use their own gifts.

The ascension means that sometimes God seems to disappear or be absent to put us to work on our own. But even when God seems absent, God is still present — guiding us, empowering us, and inviting us to follow in the way of Christ. Amen.