Book 32

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 said 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 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 Christian 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 used for the baptism of early converts to the Christian faith. It states in brief form the core of the most essential elements of the Christian faith.

There's one phrase in the creed I want us to consider especially in this sermon. "He ascended into heaven." This sentence 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 set aside called "Ascension Day," which commemorates this incident. By tradition it occurs 40 days after Easter Sunday which places it on a Thursday. Since most Christian congregations do not regularly have worship services on Thursdays, it has become for many Christians a forgotten festival. In summary the story tells us that 40 days after Easter, Jesus gathered his disciples, gave them some 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 the Book of Acts and this phrase from the Apostle's Creed mean for us in our daily lives?

I don't know about you, but whenever I think of the ascension, I can still see in my mind's eye a very large picture which was painted on the back balcony wall of the church where I grew up. It was a painting of Jesus leaving the earth and going up into the clouds.

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.

Now with our increasing knowledge of outer space and with astronauts orbiting the earth, landing on the moon and with the new Hubble

telescope revealing more and more the infinity of creation, we have a new understanding of the immensity of creation. So at first glance, the idea of the "ascension" might seem to have little meaning or relevance for today.

However we should not let the word "ascension" bother us too much. Nor should we allow the world-view 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 in that time. If we had a similar experience in our time, we would describe it through the filter of our own world-view.

Where we have to begin 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 their own responsibility as followers of Christ. It also revealed something to them about their own daily lives especially in their relationship to others.

To help us understand what the idea of the ascension says to us today in our lives as Christians and in our day to day living with others, here's the background or context.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus; after finding the empty tomb, we have the testimony of the closest followers of Jesus that they experienced his presence in a number of partic-

ular times and places. He would be with them in one place, then disappear suddenly and then appear in another place. As a result, the disciples still depended on him in much the same way as they did before he was killed.

However in a few days or weeks, a change took place. We don't know if it happened all of a sudden or 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 the 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 among them when they were gathered together, instead of being localized in a person external and separate from them.

To put it another way, Jesus was absent from them, however his spirit and presence within them and among them was stronger than before. He was absent yet present in a new way.

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

So first of all, the early church remembered and

celebrated 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 an expanded way.

Before the resurrection and ascension, he could only be 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 to a limited geographical area. 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 begin to follow him. For a year or two or maybe three, a small religious revival appears here and there. For some, expectations are high. Also, there is opposition from the political and religious authorities.

The opposition grows. A last supper is held in an upper room. One of his closest disciples betrays him. Most of the rest of the them except for a few women run away in fear. He is arrested. A quick trial is held and he is nailed to a cross and after he dies, buried in a borrowed tomb. Some women who come to the tomb on early Sunday morning find the tomb empty and are told that he has risen. Then he appears to some of his closest followers without any announcement.

They touch him, eat with him. All of this takes place in a small geographical area. It is a local affair.

But now add to this the experience of the ascension. Jesus now no longer appears to them in a physical sense. He is no longer only in one place at a time. What began as a local affair is now much more. This is the Christ of God who will draw all people, no matter where they live, or what their religious background, to God. The power and love of God which his followers felt when they were physically in his presence is now everywhere present. They no longer need to see or touch him through their senses to know him and the power of God which flows 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 present with them in another way. He would now continue his work primarily through them. They were to be his witnesses in all the world.

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 in power wherever they were, on the road, in prison or in the Roman arena facing death.

A larger principle is at work here and it's still true today. The ascension tells us that in someone's absence, we can begin to see and understand that person in a way that was not possible before.

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

When Lincoln's Gettysburg address was first spoken, it was characterized in some American newspapers as a cheap political harangue that desecrated the soldier's graves, but distance has now helped to see and understand it more clearly. When Harry Truman was president and for the ten or more years following his presidency, he was not thought of very highly. Now the further distance we have, the more we are realizing his stature.

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 too 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 relationship. He had tried to show and tell them in many different ways that he and God were intimately related and they would come to know God and God's power better through him. But they did not get it. At the last

supper, Philip in frustration 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?" Being present with each other, no matter how intimate the relationship does not reveal to us all there is to know about each other. Sometimes our children understand their parents better after the children are grown up and gone from home and parents understand their children better in same way.

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 new ways. We are less distracted by each other's idiosyncracies and we are better able to see and understand each other's inner core. In distance and memory we are able to be in touch with each other's spirit.

That's why Jesus said to his disciples, "It is to your advantage that I go away." He went on to explain that once he was gone, they would remember his teachings with a new understanding.

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. Distance and absence can give us needed perspective. Has it not been your experience as it has been 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.

Note also 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 were to learn to carry their own cross, they had to do it when he was not there. If they were to bear the burdens of others, sweating and agonizing under the load, Jesus must not be so near, so immediately available so as to provide an easy escape. The ascension of Jesus was for their sake and ours.

The disciples made an amazing discovery. Although Christ was absent from them in the usual sense in which they experienced him, he was very much present in other ways.

Now they were able to see him not only in themselves but in others. He was present in the stranger, the neighbor and in the enemy that Jesus had commanded them to love. They discovered and we can discover that Christ comes to us in the guise of children, the hungry, the homeless and the neighbor- in-need next door. Now they began to understand what Jesus meant when he said, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

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 began to work on their own. Had he stayed with them as a visible presence it might never occurred to them that they were now Christ's hands, feet, eyes, ears and mouth. They were to be the body of Christ even as the church today is the body of Christ.

We know how this works 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.

So it is in many aspects of our lives. Sometimes the individuals who are at 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 can put to use what they have learned from the one who was in the center.

This also means that sometimes God seems to disappear or be necessarily absent in order to put us to work on our own. God wants responsible persons to work in love, not puppets. Yet God never leaves us completely alone. Even when God is absent, God is present. Amen.