Sunday, June 1, 2003
ABSENCE AND PRESENCE
Acts 1:6-14

One of the historic creeds of the Christian church is known as the “Apostle’s Creed.” It is still recited in many Christian worship services. I’m sure some of you know it from memory.

“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 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 it’s called the “Apostle’s Creed,” historians are quite certain that the Apostles did not write it. It gradually evolved and came into use as part of a ritual used for the baptism of early converts to the Christian faith. It attempts to state in concise form the essential elements of the Christian faith.

There’s one phrase I want you to consider especially in this sermon: “He (that is, Jesus) ascended into heaven.” This sentence is based on the story written by Luke in what is called the book of Acts, or the Acts of the Apostles, in the New Testament.

On the Christian liturgical calendar, there’s a day set aside called “Ascension Day,” which commemorates this story. By tradition, it occurs 40 days after Easter Sunday, which places it on a Thursday. Since most Christian congregations do not regularly hold worship services on Thursdays, it has become for many church members a forgotten event. According to the story in Acts, forty days after Easter, Jesus appeared to his disciples, gave them some final instructions, and then disappeared into the clouds.

Why did the early church set aside a day to remember the “ascension"? And even more important, what does this story and the phrase from the Apostle’s Creed mean for you today in your daily life?

Whenever I think of the ascension, I remember a very large picture that was painted on the back balcony wall of the church where I grew up. It was a painting of Jesus leaving the earth and ascending into the clouds.

On the surface, the story belongs to a pre-scientific age when people believed the earth was flat, and God and heaven were somewhere “up there,” and the place of death was somewhere beneath the earth. It was natural, therefore, for the Apostle’s Creed to speak of descending and ascending.

With our increasing knowledge of outer space, and with astronauts orbiting the earth, landing on the moon, and with the Hubble telescope revealing more and more of the infinity of creation, there is a new understanding of the immensity of what lies beyond. So, at first glance, the idea of the “ascension” might seem to have little meaning or relevance for today.

However, I believe there is deep meaning hidden in this story. To uncover the meaning, you should not let the word “ascension” bother you too much. Nor should you allow the worldview of the Biblical writers to become a stumbling block. Those who remembered and told the story of the ascension had to express what happened in the worldview of their time.

To help you understand the underlying message of the story of the ascension, you have to recall the context. Here it is: Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, after finding the empty tomb, there is the testimony of the closest followers of Jesus that they experienced his presence in a number of specific times and places. He would be with them in one place, then disappear suddenly, and then reappear 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 began to take place. No one is sure if it happened all of a sudden or gradually. The change was that Jesus was no longer with them in a visible, physical way, so that they could say, “There he is over there,” or “Here he is in this room.” The early church expressed this change in relationship and dependency by saying he had “ascended.”

Following this change, something else happened. Now they began to experience Jesus as a power or spirit among them and within them. It was as if the power of Jesus was now present within each one of them, and especially 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.

If you’ve had someone you’ve loved very much die, you might have had a similar experience. Here’s how one friend of mine described it after the rather sudden death of her husband. For several weeks or even a month or two following the funeral, she said it almost seemed at times that her husband would be present in a room. She couldn’t see him, but she felt it. She would find herself talking to him. Then, after a time, that didn’t happen anymore, but she now experienced his presence in a more general way.

Something else happened with the followers of Jesus. Now they began to tell others about their experience. They began to talk about what God has done through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus with a new urgency and energy.

So, first of all, the early followers remembered and celebrated the experience of the ascension because it reminded them that Jesus, who had been crucified, dead, and buried, and raised again, was now with them and among them in an expanded and new way.

Before the resurrection and ascension, he could only be in one place at one time and was limited in all the ways that you are limited by time and space. Now the “ascended” Jesus was no longer subject to these limitations. He had become the cosmic Christ. They experienced him everywhere.

Before the ascension, he 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 young 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 movement 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. One of his disciples betrays him. Most of the rest of them, except for a few women, run away in fear. He is arrested. A quick trial is held, and he is sentenced to death by crucifixion. Following his death on the cross, he is buried in a borrowed tomb. Some women who come to the tomb early on Sunday morning find it empty and are told that he is risen. Then he appears to some of his closest followers without any announcement. They touch him. They eat with him. He disappears and then reappears among them. All of this takes place in a small geographical area. It is a local affair.

Now, add to this the story of the ascension. Jesus 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. Now the Spirit of the Love of God, which was present in Jesus, begins to attract people no matter where they live and regardless of their religious background. The power and love of God that his followers felt when they were physically in his presence is now everywhere present. They no longer need to see or touch him physically in order to experience the power and loving energy of God which flows through him.

This, in large part, is what the idea of the ascension means. It is what the early followers of Jesus experienced. It wasn't that he 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 be aware of his presence 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 story of the ascension tells you that in someone's absence, you can begin to understand that person in a way that was not possible in their presence.

This sounds like a contradiction, so let me explain. It frequently takes time and distance to give you perspective. When you are too close to an event or person, you cannot see or understand that person or event in the same way as you can from a distance.

When Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was first delivered, it was characterized in some U.S. newspapers as a cheap political harangue that desecrated the soldiers' graves. 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 term of office, he was not thought of very highly. Now, because of distance, historians are realizing his stature.

Jesus said over and over again to his disciples, "What I am doing now you do not understand, but afterward you will understand." How true that is in much of life. There are so many things you cannot fully understand when you are in the midst of them or when you 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.

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 connected, and that they would come to know God and God's love better than ever before through him. But

they did not get it. At the Last Supper, Philip, in frustration, expressed what they were feeling: “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 someone, no matter how intimate the relationship, does not reveal to you all there is to know about that person. Sometimes children understand their parents better after they are grown up and gone from home, and parents understand their children better in their absence.

The more experience in living you have, the more you come to know and sense that closeness grows in continuous interplay between presence and absence, between intimacy and distance. In absence, in distance, and in memory, you can come to see another person in a new light. You are less distracted by the idiosyncrasies, and you are better able to see and understand the other’s inner core. In absence and memory, you are able to be in touch with another’s spirit.

That’s why Jesus said, “It is to your advantage that I go away.” He went on to explain that once he was gone, they would remember and understand his teaching.

Of course, it’s true that memory can sometimes distort, falsify, and is subject to selective remembering. But memory can also clarify, purify, and bring into focus. Distance and absence can give you needed perspective. Has it not been your experience, as it has been mine, that only after being gone from the home where you grew up did you truly begin to appreciate it for what it was?

Furthermore, once Jesus was physically gone from the disciples, then they were able to see him not only in themselves but also in others. He was present in the stranger, the neighbor, and in the enemy that Jesus had commanded them to love. They discovered — and you can discover — him in the guise of children, the hungry, the homeless, and the neighbor in need. And as was mentioned in last week’s sermon, they were able to discover Jesus in their friends. What a Jesus you have in a friend.

There’s one more point to be made. It wasn’t until the ascension that they began to work using their own initiative. Had he stayed with them as a visible presence, it might never have occurred to them that they were now his hands, feet, eyes, ears, and mouth. They were to be the body of Christ, even as the church today is his body.

You’ve seen this work in everyday relationships. Until parents get out of the way physically so that young people can no longer rely on their parents for every little decision and need, it is only then that they really begin to mature and to become individuals in their own right. This also means that sometimes God seems to disappear or be necessarily absent in order to put us to work on our own. Yet God never leaves us completely alone. Even when God is absent, God is present. Amen.