

## **The Presence of Jesus**

Acts 1:1-11 / Luke 24:44-53

The Feast of the Ascension\ Year C  
2010

May 16,

**O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.**

Many people find it rather easy, even convenient, to make a sharp distinction between the material world and the spiritual world. By divorcing these two worlds from each other, we are better able to declare one of them real, while deeming the other unreal. We can isolate them as being either sensible or insensible. Scientists will even go so far as to declare one provable, while noting that the other defies our best attempts at impartial analysis and provability. Some people even try to discount completely what is commonly termed “the spiritual world.” They claim that since we are incapable of testing the spirit or the soul in a laboratory, then the spirit or the soul must not exist. Most of us, however, would beg to differ. We have a great deal of experience with the realms of the spirit and we firmly believe in the spiritual world. We are able to vaguely sense our connection to it every time a new idea pops into our heads, particularly if that idea is an answer to a problem on which we have been working. We call such an occurrence, inspiration. The “spiritual” even materializes in some of the most unlikely places. We catch school spirit at pep rallies and at NCAA basketball games. We talk about high-spirited adventures and we look for something to cheer us when we are in low-spirits. While such experiences of the spiritual world are hardly tangible, we still act upon them as if they have substance, which of course they do. Not everything important in human affairs and in the human experience is tangible and sensible. In fact, sometimes what is most real to us is the realm of the spirit. The “spirit” is what can most motivate us, inspire us, bring us insight and urge us to undertake creative responses to situations that would otherwise perplex or overwhelm us. The Spirit may even force us to re-evaluate the line we enjoy drawing between what is spiritual and what is material.

We can well imagine the disciples’ perplexity within this morning’s scripture readings. We can appreciate their concern and their overwhelming sense of absence, even loss, when Jesus ascends into heaven. The Book of Acts, mentions that “as [Christ] was going” the disciples were “standing there looking at the sky.” Their behavior is reminiscent of children craning their necks in order to see a hot air balloon drift on the afternoon breeze. They seem intent on catching a last glimpse of Jesus before he fades into the distance. Their faces betray a wistfulness not usually seen, while their eyes reflect their unstated hope that perhaps Christ will not truly leave them. Despite their almost anguished expressions, the disciples are hardly bereft. There is another comforter on the way or so they have been told. The “promise of the Father,” the Holy Spirit will come upon them not many days from now. They are to go to Jerusalem, wait there and receive power- a simple enough command for them to obey. For the moment, however, they are unable to move. They can do little more than stare at the heavens. They are lost in an understandable but vain attempt to capture something of Jesus’ presence, so that they will not have to feel his absence so keenly.

As both time and the gospels will tell us, Jesus' departure from our sight is by no means indicative of Jesus choosing to absent himself from us. Instead, his ascent into heaven signifies a new kind of presence and inaugurates a new way for Him to be with us. A reality, to which Christ himself points in both the book of Acts and in the gospel of Luke. In fact, today's gospel reading begins with the very proclamation of who Jesus is and how we will come to know him. The scene is tranquil and peculiarly domestic. The Risen Jesus is sitting among his gathered disciples. He is eating with them, allowing them to touch and to see him. His wounds, the same wounds in which Thomas wished to poke around, are open and un-bandaged. These gaping holes, scored into his flesh by the crucifixion, are welcoming and invitational. They offer a strange hospitality to all who would look upon them and enter into them. The atmosphere is electric as words flow from Christ's mouth much as blood once spilled forth from his injuries. He is teaching his disciples. He is interpreting and unfolding before them the Scriptures. He is opening their minds and hearts to deeper levels of understanding. But more than that, he is revealing to them how his suffering and death, how his dying and rising, are part and parcel of his identity. The cross and the resurrection are essential to who Jesus was, and is and will be, just as the cross and resurrection are essential for who we are, were and will be as individuals and as a community of faith. As the Father brought Jesus' life and death to their ultimate fulfillment, by raising Him in the Spirit from the dead, so, too, will the Father bring us to fulfillment. We have his word on it.

In the here and now, we are being raised in the Spirit, the Spirit which is even now actualizing, invigorating, and inspiring our resurrected existence. By this same Spirit, we will come to know the Resurrected Christ and be able to experience his presence in the midst of seeming absence. He will see him, touch him, and eat with him in much the same way as the disciples in countless generations have been able to see him, touch him and eat with him. We will come to know him in the breaking of the bread and amidst our efforts to thoughtfully chew on his words. We will come to know him by word and table, by living into the worship practices of the very community his death and rising creates. Our participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion is but one example of how our awareness of Christ is transformed. Holy Communion is not some maudlin monthly ritual with makes us late for lunch anymore than it is an overdone memorial service for a dead Jesus. Our celebration of communion is a festive meal, a meal with transcends time and place. Holy Communion is the very meal shared by the Resurrected Christ with his apostles in today's gospel reading and it is the very meal he shares with us. Holy Communion is a Eucharist, a Great Thanksgiving by which we are able to discern the gift of Christ's presence with us and among. We encounter the gift of Christ's self in communion and by that gift he intends to define and re-pattern our lives into the very shape of his cross.

While we come to know Christ's presence among us in the sharing of bread and wine, we discover him to be equally present when we prayerfully break open and share the Scriptures. He tells us in this morning's gospel that "everything written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." His words are a clear indication that it is to himself that the Law, the prophet and the psalms point. In

other words, he wishes to make clear that how we go about reading our scriptures, how we interpret what they say, can only be done in reference to Himself. Christ becomes the lens, the defining presence, the ground of meaning on which the truth of our scriptures stand. To put it pointedly, He tells us what scripture mean. When we gather for worship, when we sit in Sunday School, when we come to Bible Study, Jesus is there opening the scriptures for us. Lest we mistake our own egos and intellect for his presence, you will notice that Christ shows up most fully when two or three are gathered in community rather than when we are alone with our own biblical agendas. A well-known divinity school professor once warned a group of naïve seminarians that they were to never interpret scripture on their own, the danger of doing violence to the divine word and to themselves was simply too great.

Despite the supposed “absence” left by Christ’s ascension, His presence does remain with us. That said, the Lord’s presence is mediated through book, bread, wine and one other extremely important medium. He becomes present through his followers, through you and me. In today’s readings, when Christ finishes teaching his disciples he leads them out as far as Bethany. Even at this last minute, they are still expecting that something immediate, visible, tangible will happen on earth. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?” they ask. The only response which they are given and that we receive is the promise of the Spirit and instructions to preach in Christ’s name to all the nations. Christ then ascends. His ascension into heaven becomes, for all intents and purposes, our commissioning on earth. We are commanded to make him known, to preach him in all the ways and forms that our lives can preach him. To accomplish his mission, we become clothed with power from on high and by this power we become the visible presence of Jesus in the world. The Holy Spirit consecrates us to continue Christ’s saving mission. The very absence, seemingly created by Christ’s ascension, thus sends us forth to be and do as Jesus. That said, we do not “live Jesus” under our own steam but we are empowered and transformed by the Spirit. The work we undertake for the gospel is thus not our work, but Christ’s work in us. Our vocation, our calling, therefore, is quite simple. We are to break open our lives and stories and sacrifice them to the life and story of Jesus Christ. In doing so, we die to ourselves, and then, by the power of his resurrecting Spirit, we become the risen presence of our Lord for each other and for the world. We no longer need stare at a Jesus drifting out of our sight or struggle anxiously to catch a glimpse of his retreating presence. For by his Spirit, he is with us and it is that spirit, whether we wait for its descent in Jerusalem or Littleton, which we must catch.

