

Acts 1:1-14  
John 17:1-11

“‘But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

There’s something I find hard about the story of the Ascension.

It’s not the ascending itself. From healings, to walking on water, to the unsurpassable miracle of *rising from the dead*, the thought the Jesus could ascend from the earth seems well within God’s capacity.

What I sometimes find hard is that last line from the verse I just read: “As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

Jesus leaves. Leaves? He *seems*, at least, to depart from the disciples. They had gotten used to having him back, and now suddenly he is leaving again. Was he leaving for good?

Why did Jesus leave? That’s the thing that seems so hard to make sense of. Things seem to have just been getting good! He was risen. His disciples believed in him. They thought he was going to begin a new kingdom – a new community and society with Jesus as the center and guide (About which they were right! But not in the way they thought.)

I was thinking about this strange-seeming decision of God’s and wondering why Jesus would depart, when I remembered that God walking the earth in human form is the exception. That the whole creation generally functions on a different pattern than I was considering.

God created the world. We find the signs of his work and his presence all around. To think of God as being in just one particular place, as his disciples probably thought with some frequency during those 3 years of his earthly ministry, that is really the departure from the norm of how humanity has experienced and encountered God.

God didn’t really leave. Because God is everywhere, and was everywhere even the whole while Jesus was walking about on earth. The Creator and Sustainer of the universe was in all places bringing forth life, sustaining the world all through the days that our Redeemer was walking on earth. I imagine that might have been in some ways hard to grasp for people like the disciples when they were looking face to face with God in the flesh.

I think, too, of the recipients of those many, many healing stories. The wonder, splendor, and incredible intimacy of such an encounter with Jesus. The astonishing revelation of his power in those moments – the revelation of his divinity. What a moment of conviction, of conversion, of belief in God’s presence.

But think how hard and strange it must have been for most of those people to then watch God walk away. To watch God go to continue his ministry with other people in other places. That must have been so confusing for all of those healed people. To feel as if God had *left*.

For us physical, bodily creatures, sight, and touch, and hearing – and even smell! – are so compelling for how we detect the presence of something. I can see how after a physical encounter with God, when Jesus then walked away, a person could have a sense of God’s absence.

But the Truth, of course, is that God is never absent. And not only that – because of the Ascension, because of the whole trajectory of Incarnation and Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost – the coming of the Holy

Spirit – God is present with and in us. Present with *each* of us *all* the time, in a way deeply and profoundly beyond what humanity had ever experienced before.

The Holy Spirit had already been in the world – indeed the Spirit was moving over the water in Creation. The Spirit was always with the Father and the Son making and sustaining the world.

The Holy Spirit also had rested on people before. The Spirit lay heavily upon the prophets and filled them with the power of God and the presence of God in an intense and compelling way.

But until now – until Jesus sends the Spirit to his disciples, we never hear in Scripture about this deep connection to God’s presence through the Holy Spirit being constantly available to all.

I don’t really know what it was like to experience God before the sending of the Holy Spirit. But now we do not ever need to feel that God has departed or is distant from us at all. The collect for Ascension Day last Thursday tells us that when God in Christ ascended above the heavens, he filled all things.

As so God is in us. God is all around us. “In him we live and move and have our being.” He has not left. He is profoundly close to each of us, all the time.

And this we celebrate this morning in two profound and connected ways. We celebrate that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God will be present with us with special intensity this morning. This morning Alessandra Lila Nider will be baptized with water and the Holy Spirit, and this initiates her into a relationship with God beyond all that she, a beloved creature of God already, has ever known.

She will be cleansed from sin and born again. She will be sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever – a closeness of bond with Jesus that he will never abandon.

And she will become a member of the Body of Christ. A hand! A foot! A heart!? A physical manifestation, and a physical part of God’s presence in the world. All you who have been baptized, do you remember that this is so? You, in your own bodies, are Jesus’ physical presence in the world.

And this is why baptism leads us to Holy Communion. Leads us to receiving – eating! – the Body of Christ. Because we who are the Body of Christ can forget. It’s such a wild, astonishing thing, that it can be hard to hold the wonder and mystery of that Truth in our minds. And so we can come and remember – Sunday by Sunday or even day by day.

When we receive Communion, Christ comes to us and reminds us of our nature as the Body of Christ in the most shocking and intimate way. He comes to us, physically, under the forms of bread and wine. He comes – descends – physically from heaven, as the angels said he would return again. Coming to us in physical things and telling us, “Eat. Drink”. Take God’s body into your body so that you can remember that he is physically present also in *you*.

Stand in awe. Gape into heaven! Gape at each other, because the Body of Christ is right beside you in the pews! Gape at the incredible mystery of Christ present in your own self. And then, shut your mouth, look around, and know that you bear the presence of God in your person everywhere you go.

You are a living, breathing reminder of God’s constant presence and love in the world. And so come, gather at the font, and see the Spirit of God at work again. Then gather at the altar, and remember who and what you are, members of the Body of Christ.

And the GO!!! Witness! Testify! Love! Be a sign of Jesus present in this world! Join the witnesses in Alexandria, Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Amen.