

Seventh Sunday after Easter
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
13 May 2018

Luke 24:44-53

One of the most interesting experiences to observe in babies is the development of separation anxiety. Babies of between eight months and a year and a half begin to develop anxiety when separated from primary care givers, especially the mother. The main reason for the anxiety is a lack of understanding of time. Simply put, when a mother leaves the room, a baby has no way of telling if the separation is temporary or final and if the mother will return or not. “Children recognize their parents as familiar and safe. When separated from parents, particularly when away from home, they feel threatened and unsafe” (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/separation-anxiety>). This is a normal developmental stage for all babies, but it can be quite unsettling for babies going through it.

In a way, the ascension of Christ produces a great deal of separation anxiety for the apostles and disciples. They were deeply attached to Jesus. They had developed a bond forged on love, faith and hope. They had left their former lives behind to follow Jesus. They had lived with him for three years, sharing meals with him, talking and arguing until all hours of the night, walking for countless hours from village to village, laughing and crying together, and slowly developing a friendship that would last for all ages. The young, infant church needed Jesus among them as a young child needs the reassuring voice of her mother near her. Jesus knows his departure will cause great anxiety. He knows that the infant church will struggle without him. This is the reason why in his farewell speech Jesus goes through great pains to comfort them and strengthen their faith. As he is about to leave, Jesus says to them:

These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you-- that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.

This statement alone, if properly understood, should have given the disciples the reassurance they needed. Jesus fulfills the scriptures, which of course means that as Messiah he was “to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day.” It also means that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” It also means that Jesus would remain in a very real way present in their lives forever. Through the resurrection, God gave Christ all power and authority for all ages and now this Christ who was their friend, their companion, and their

redeemer would become the universal redeemer and the universal Christ for all ages. If Christ fulfills all Scriptures then he will remain present in the world for all ages. He will take our humanity to heaven, even as he brought his divinity to earth. He will be all things and in all things, as Paul reminds us. He had to ascend to his Father because no age of history can fully contain him. He transcends time and space. He is above all, beyond all, and yet, present in all. He is the fulfillment of God's creation. He must ascend that men and women of all times may one day be where he is. Ascension means that Christ belongs to twenty-first century America as much as he belonged to first-century Palestine. Ascension is a necessary physical departure from Palestine in order to be fully present in the whole world. Jesus transcends all geographical, ethnic, socio-political, and cultural boundaries. No age can contain him or limit him.

But, even if the Apostles and Disciples understand the reason for this ascension, and I am not sure they do, ascension is in itself a sad event. Acts of the Apostles tells us that Jesus' friends remained gazing at the heavens for a long time. Angels appear to them and tell them, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Let me share a personal story to illustrate this point. I was four years old when my mother left Colombia and came to the United States to work in the textile mills of Paterson, New Jersey. Hers was a typical immigrant story. She came to this country to provide a better life for her family, after my father's farm and business had experienced serious difficulties. Even though I knew the reason for her sacrifice and even though today I give thanks to God for her courage and love, I remember how difficult those four years of her absence were for my siblings and I. We felt abandoned, orphaned, left behind. We understood the necessity of her actions, but we missed her terribly nonetheless.

This is what the Apostles and Disciples are going through today. This is the reason why Jesus commands them to return to Jerusalem and wait for his Father's gift. God's Holy Spirit will come upon them in just a few days and this Spirit will give them the strength, the courage, the confidence, and the faith they need to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus name, from Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the world. In many ways, waiting for Jesus' return is only possible because of God's Holy Spirit present in our lives. It is the Holy Spirit who reminds us daily that Christ will return. He has not abandoned us. We can not see him face to face as the Disciples were able to see him, but this doesn't mean that he is not here with us. He is in our midst, in our world, in the people we encounter every day. And he will return soon in person.

Until then we remain in the in-between times. We remain in that space between the "He has come" and the "he will come again." This is a time of joyful expectation and longing. A time filled with presence and absence. Presence because we know that he is

really present in our Holy Eucharist, really present in the church, really present in the people we meet each day, really present in our world. On the other hand, we live in absence because we know that he is not here as you and I are here. We can not see him face to face. We can not rest comfortable under his loving embrace. We can not yet rest from our labors.

Today, as we celebrate Mother's Day and as we give thanks to God for all the sacrifices our mothers have made for us, we look with longing eyes up at heaven and we pray "Come, Lord Jesus Come!" But, we must do more than praying for his return. We must also endeavor to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all the people we encounter in our lives. We must endeavor to love him as we encounter him in the people we meet each day. This is what life in the presence-absence of Jesus entails. It entails longing for tomorrow to come, even as we live fully today. May our Lord continue to bless you and Happy Mother's Day. Amen!