

“Absence”
May 24, 2020

II Corinthians 1:4-5
Acts 1:1-11

The Acts of the Apostles begins with the story of the risen Christ leaving his followers.

Now I have to admit that I’m a little uncomfortable with this story. Maybe you are, as well. It grows out of an ancient and outdated picture of the cosmos: a flat earth, with “heaven” above. In an age in which we think of the universe as infinite in all directions, in which we know the earth is round, we don’t talk much about “going up to heaven” anymore.

And yet, this story speaks to us as we seek to follow in the way of Jesus Christ, who is nowhere to be seen.

It speaks to our work of trying to be the church without Jesus.

And this year, especially, it speaks to us as we live in a time of absence.

Absence weighs heavily on so many in these days. Separated from one another, grandparents miss their grandchildren and grandchildren long to see their grandparents. Children, teenagers, and adults miss hanging out with their friends. Teachers miss students. Employers miss employees.

And members of this congregation miss each other. Someone recently sent their offering to the church with a note: “How I wish we could, once again, pass the offering plate!” Who knew we’d miss the offering? But we do! We would like the feel of receiving that heavy brass plate from our neighbor and passing it on to another.

But for now what we feel is absence.

And that can weigh heavily on our hearts.

This last Sunday of the Easter season is also the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, a time when we remember the sacrifices of those whose lives ended in war, whose absence from our lives and the life of our nation have been deeply felt and recognized throughout our history.

This year, as we remember the deaths in war there are new deaths that both haunt us and go ignored.

This year there is a new and great absence from Covid-19 deaths—more in the past three months than in the whole of the Vietnam War—that weighs on us and our nation.

Late last week as the death toll for Covid-19 in the United States topped 94,000 people—over 400 of them Iowans—the minority leaders in Congress called on the president to lower the flags to half-staff when that count reaches 100,000. They said this would be a ‘national expression of grief so needed by everyone.’”

In response, the president ordered flags to be lowered immediately—from last Friday through Sunday.

It was a surprisingly fast response, especially because such expressions have been curiously absent from the public life of our nation.

Micki McElya, professor of history at the University of Connecticut noted that these deaths have not been marked in the usual ways. There have been no candlelight vigils, no moments of silence. We do not ask for whom the bell tolls, because the bells are silent. Aside from the tweet announcing the lowering of the flags, the president has not given voice to a collective national recognition that something of great moment is occurring.

People are dying, often alone. Each individual death affects family and friends and community, leaving countless people in anguish.

But the great collective absence that has come to our country is met with silence and ignored. “Shared grief brings people together like little else,” McElya says. “But in the case of the pandemic, even Americans apparently are not ‘all Americans,’ or rather some are less recognized in national kinship.” Looking around for a reason, she notes: “The covid-19 dead are disproportionately urban, people of color, immigrants, the undocumented, the incarcerated, the elderly in nursing homes and state care facilities, the poor, the uninsured, the chronically ill, service workers and delivery people.”¹

That is to say, they are people on the margins, people who don’t seem to matter, people whose absence is not recognized or grieved.

Back in mid-March when asked about the pandemic as it was taking hold in the United States, the president infamously said “I don’t take responsibility at all.” And he began the process of erasing the victims of this disease from the nation’s view.

The governor of Iowa no longer reports on those who have died in her daily press conferences.

One of the tasks that we have as people of faith in these days, then, is to remember those who have died, to make this absence real.

How will we show 100,000 deaths? How will we remember?

To “re-member” is to re-unite one who has been separated—to bring them back into membership, into community. Remembrance is a form of resurrection.

It is a sacred thing to remember those who have died because in handling the memory of God-given lives, we participate with God in the healing of the world.

In remembering, we put broken pieces together once more.

Our prayer in times like these is that the deep consolation of God might be known in our lives and in the life of the world. We need the comfort of God that makes strong for the days ahead so that we in turn can comfort others.

But how shall we process this great loss, this absence?

The story of the Ascension helps.

In its own way, this story speaks to our modern lives. It begins by confirming what we already know: the risen Christ is not here. He was with us. Now we are without him.

He is not here.

He is absent.

If we stop thinking in terms of up and down, heaven and earth, if we think about it theologically, we begin to see the light that this old story shines on our often shadowed lives today. The ascension of Jesus is not some obscure happening. It is central to our faith. The ascension asks questions that we ask each day:

What does it mean to “follow Jesus” when there is no Jesus to follow?

How do I affirm life when people are dying?

In short: What does it mean to be a Christian today?

The resurrection of Jesus begins something new.

But we know how difficult it can be to let go of old, worn out expectations. We understand the feeling when the followers of Jesus drag out their hopes like some old moth-eaten coat: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Memories of faded glory still dance in their minds. Maybe now. Maybe now they will experience the restoration of the old kingdom. Maybe now their nation will be made great again.

Our nation “reopens.” Maybe now. Maybe now we can get our hair cut and go to a movie and get back to the way things were in February. Maybe now “the economy” will come roaring back.

“Is this the time...?”

How does Jesus respond to such hopes?

“It’s not for you to know. . .”

All hopes for a revival of the past are put aside. The new task is to find a vision for a future that is unknown and uncertain.

These are words for people settling in for the long haul. They call us to look at what we have lost, to consider in faith all that is absent.

The great loss that has come upon our nation is not just a private deprivation. It is ours—yours and mine—as well. It also belongs to our neighbors and to those whom we don’t know. The great loss that has come upon our nation is just that: a national loss, an American absence that

must be acknowledged and walked through before we are able to go any further.

Only as we acknowledge this loss will we be able to begin the work of creating a new future that will be something other than the restoration of a decayed order that has marginalized and made invisible countless people. Only then will we be able to create something other than the numbed consumer society in which we have lived for so long, a culture that has made it possible for the deaths of 100,000 Americans to not register on our national consciousness.

There are times when we set aside old hopes and old expectations so that something different can rise up.

There are times when we stop fighting old battles, nursing old wounds, dreaming old dreams.

This is such a time.

And at just such a time, the promise comes: “You will receive *power*.”

You—we—will receive the ability to act.

Even now, in the midst of this challenging time—

We are given the power to take charge of our lives, to change what needs changing.

We are given the power to be agents of God’s love in the world—to take risks for the good.

We are given the power to choose something new as the old, familiar ways are crumbling around us.

Absence makes for a new kind of presence.

The risen Christ no longer with us is—somehow—the Spirit of God powerfully present for us at all times.

This Jesus who is gone is the one who said: “I am with you always.”

This Jesus who cried out: “My God, why have you forsaken me?” to One who seemed silent, speaks to us of God’s unwavering care.

The streets have been empty and are starting to fill in once more.

The parks have been deserted and now people jog through them.

The stores have been shuttered and now the sign on the door reads, “Yes, we’re open.”

It’s all uncertain—don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. No one knows what will happen.

But there is an absence that is being filled in—for better or worse.

In the same way the absence of the risen Christ creates a space that allows the rushing wind of

the Spirit of God into our lives and our world—the new reality that we celebrate on Pentecost next Sunday and experience each day.

The Spirit made possible by absence turns our attention toward this world.

As Jesus is taken out of the sight of the disciples, two men robed in white ask them: “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

Our attention is always directed back to this earth, with its struggles and challenges and opportunities.

The Spirit of the living God fills the absence in our lives, in our grief, in our anger and calls us still to be a part of God’s new creation.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/national-mourning-coronavirus/2020/05/15/b47fc670-9577-11ea-82b4-c8db161ff6e5_story.html