



**Thursday, May 21, 2020**  
**Ascension Day Sermon**  
**The Rt. Rev. Susan E. Goff**

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, they say.  
Out of sight, out of mind, they also say.

Both can't be true at once, so which is it?

For the friends of Jesus, the men and women who followed him and loved him, absence and hearts and sight and mind got all muddled together after Jesus died so violently on the cross. His absence was pure agony for them as they hid in fear behind locked doors. Every memory of him was pierced through with pain. Jesus would never be out of their minds, but his words escaped their understanding under the crush of grief. I think that's why Cleopas and the other follower didn't recognize him when he walked with them on the road to Emmaus. (Luke 24:13-35) I think that's why the fishermen on the lakeside didn't immediately know who he was when he told them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. (John 21:4-8) He'd been out of sight, and they were out of their minds with confusion, sadness and uncertainty.

Quickly, though, they did begin to recognize his presence. And for forty glorious days they saw him among them in unexpected flashes of wonder and hope that burned like welcome fire in their hearts. They came to know beyond a shadow of a doubt the Jesus lives. Their minds, which for a few awful days were filled only with Jesus' absence, were transformed and renewed by his presence.

And then the time came for him to leave them again, to be out of sight and absent once more. It is the time we remember on the Feast of the Ascension. Listen to how the evangelist Luke tells it: "Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God."

What a difference! Forty days after the resurrection, the thought of Jesus' absence no longer terrified his friends. This time, his departure was filled with the lifting up of hands and blessing and joy. This time, the thought of absence didn't break his followers' hearts. Because they knew that Jesus was alive and that he would live forever. Death had not defeated him. Jesus was different from before; his body was different – able to appear



behind protective walls and beyond locked doors, quick to disappear as soon as his friends understood a bit more than they had before. He was somehow different, and vibrantly alive. Because Jesus' friends knew, really knew, that death had not destroyed him, they were sure that his ascension would not destroy him. And they were sure his ascension would not destroy them, either. In fact, they suspected his departure from them would be pure blessing.

And it was. Jesus left them as he was blessing them, right in the middle of the act of blessing. "While he was blessing them," the evangelist wrote, "he withdrew from them." It was a blessing because, by leaving them, Jesus would be more present with them than ever before. As long as Jesus lived among them on earth, a mortal, limited human body, he could touch and heal and bless only a limited number of people, only those who were near him in time and in space. But by departing, by ascending, Jesus was freed from the constraints of the human body, freed from the constraints of time and place, freed to touch and heal and bless people in all times and in all places. Jesus was set free to be with everyone, everywhere. By going away from the disciples, he could be closer to them than ever before, closer to us, closer to all humanity and all creation.

As he departed, he fulfilled the promise he made just moments before, according to the way the Gospel of Matthew tells it. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," Jesus said. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." I am with you, Jesus promised, in heart and mind, in remembering and loving and in daily blessing.

By going away, Jesus was more present than ever before. But giving his authority to his friends and empowering them to be his human body in the world, he would be with them forever - with us forever.

Out of sight, out of mind? Not any more. In this case, absence makes the heart grow huge because absence becomes the greatest presence of all.

For us right now, as we continue this springtime of absence and physical distancing and staying six feet apart from others, Jesus remains closer to us than we could ask for or imagine. As we miss our family and friends, Jesus reminds us that absence is not final, never final. As we pray and care for those who are vulnerable and suffer the most in this time of pandemic, we are Jesus' own hands and feet to do his work in the world. In all that we are and all that we do, Jesus is here, right here, alive and present and wondrous. God bless us all with hope and trust in this time of absences so that, in Jesus' presence, our hearts will grow in love.

Amen