

Bodily Absence – Kent Dunnington

Acts 1: 1-11

Most Thursdays I go for a walk with my friend Caden Wayman. If you don't know Caden yet, then this is either your first time here or you are just not paying attention. Just look around during communion: he's the three year old who will be reciting the Eucharistic liturgy from memory. So, needless to say, he knows quite a bit about God.

Sometimes on our walks we talk about God. A couple of weeks ago, I asked Caden where God was. "Everywhere," he said. I thought that was a pretty solid orthodox answer, but I wanted to hear more. "Does God have a body?" I asked Caden. "Yes," Caden said. "Now I've got you," I thought to myself. "Caden," I said, "if God has a body, how can God be everywhere?" I felt sure that I had stumped him at this point, but without skipping a beat, Caden provided the following explanation: "We're all in his mouth!" The only response I could make was, "Look! There's a squirrel!"

This is Ascension Sunday. On this day we pay special attention to an event that we remember each week when we recite the creed: "Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." What does it mean for us to affirm that Jesus ascended into heaven and sits on the Father's right hand?

For one thing, it means that we, too, have to deal with this awkward question that Caden and I were wrestling with on our walk. After all, we believe at one and the same time that God is embodied and yet not bodily accessible within our space-time continuum. In other words, we believe that God is bodily...absent. What a strange thing to believe! What is the meaning of this strange conviction? What does it mean for us as creatures of the triune God that the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, who walked this earth, whom we killed, and who was raised by the Father—what does it mean for us that he departed from this earth and now reigns, bodily, on high?

First, what does it mean that he departed and is now absent? Try to put yourself in the place of the disciples. They had left careers, families, and hometowns to follow this man Jesus, whom they were sure was to restore Israel to its rightful place of world domination, to overthrow their Roman oppressors, to bring liberation and prosperity to the subjugated children of Israel. They had such high hopes, but all of these hopes were dashed on the hard wood of the cross. It had all been a mistake. But then Easter happened, and they once again basked in the glow of a hopeful future. Yet it is clear that, even after the resurrection, their hope for the future was still centered on an expectation that Israel would triumph in the world. Thus, in this morning's reading from Acts, they ask the resurrected Jesus, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Finally, they believe, they will be vindicated in the world. They are to be

exalted, now, as the rightful lords of history; their faithfulness will bear worldly fruit, in such a way that everyone will be forced to take notice and to concede that they were right after all to follow this rabbi from Nazareth. The cross had exposed them as naïve and gullible dreamers, but the resurrection would establish them as astute visionaries and savvy world-changers. So this question—“Will you now restore the kingdom to Israel?”—this question is loaded with triumphant expectation : “The world has mocked us as the losers; how soon, O Lord, will you show the world that we are the winners?”

In response to this question, however, Jesus does an odd thing. “He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Imagine their perplexity. How are we to be the rulers of this world if this man, our king, is no longer in this world? How is history to be set right if this man, our leader, is no longer part of this, our history? How is Israel to achieve world domination if its messiah has floated off to heaven?

We, too, must reckon with this divine absence. Evidently, we are not to be presently vindicated in this world. Evidently, the world may still look upon us as gullible dreamers and wishful thinkers. The world may still rightly ask of us what unbelieving Jews asked of those earliest Jesus-followers: If this Jesus is the messiah, why has nothing changed? Why do the oppressors continue to oppress, why do the poor get poorer and the rich get richer, why do the hungry starve, the naked freeze, and the sick die awful deaths.

Let us be honest about this: the world is right to ask these questions. Of course, we Christians do good things in the world. We at St. Paul’s visit the Simple Room and plant gardens, we visit the prisoners and help them get educations, we care for those whose lives have been derailed by mental illness. But are these activities really powerful? Are we really getting anywhere? Do we really believe that we are on the verge of eradicating poverty, of emptying the prisons, of curing mental illness? I suspect that it is precisely the weakness of the church in this regard that leads well-meaning and ambitious Christians to believe that any real, lasting, and powerful progress is only to be achieved through the mechanism of the state, through international, national, and local politics, through public policy and governmental programs. That is where the real work of redeeming the world gets done. Let us be realists here, they say. The church is fine for worship, for picking up our self-esteem, for giving life meaning. But if you really want to change the world, you’ve got to invest in something other than the church.

And yet, for ascension people, it should come as no surprise that our faithfulness does not translate into immediate worldly vindication. For although we proclaim that Jesus is the Lord of all creation, we also attest to his ascension and therefore to his very real absence from the world. Our King is not here; he is in heaven at the right hand of the Father. We are now, evidently, to be committed to living in the world in such a way that we do not expect to achieve worldly success, worldly status, worldly victory. We are going to have to be willing to appear to the world to be a people that cannot get anything done, whose discipleship is not effective, who is not able to achieve the redemption of the world through our faithful lives. That is what it means to affirm the ascension. Because our King has left this world, the victory of his Kingdom

cannot be seen but can only be believed, cannot be grasped but can only be hoped for, cannot be instituted but can only be awaited.

But does this not look too much like failure and concession? Aren't we a triumphant and powerful people? Perhaps all of this hand-wringing about poverty and oppression and sickness is a big distraction. Perhaps the message of the ascension is that we are not to be concerned with these things at all, but rather to be concerned only with saving people's souls for a heavenly reward. After all, Jesus ascended to go to heaven! Perhaps our calling as the followers of this man Jesus is to forget altogether about the worldly and to focus instead on the heavenly. Perhaps we are called to forget about the body and to focus instead on the soul. Perhaps we are not to be political but rather pious. Rather than striving for the redemption of the world, perhaps we are to withdraw from the world and prepare for a heavenly vindication that leaves this world far behind.

And yet our passage for today closes off this alternative just as decisively. After Jesus had left his disciples on his heavenward cloud ride, the text tells us that they were left gazing into heaven. This is the pious stance: forget about the horizontal plane, the worldly and the bodily; focus instead on the vertical plane, the heavenly and the spiritual. The pious stance invites us to disregard this vale of tears below and set our sights on the pie in the sky above. Yet the text very clearly tells us that the ascension is not an invitation to pious withdrawal from the affairs of the world. For immediately, the angels call the apostles away from their pious gaze, saying, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

We, too, must reckon with this angelic warning. Evidently we are not to be a people who abandon our hopes for this world. Evidently we are not to be a people who divorces the spiritual from the material, the soul from the body, the heavenly from the earthly. For this Jesus who was resurrected bodily also ascended bodily. And he will come again in the same way—bodily! He ascends on high, not to be ruler of some other world, but to be ruler of this world, not to be lord of the heavens, but to be lord of the earth. His will be the redemption of this world, of our bodies, and of the body of every child who visits the Simple Room, the body of every prisoner locked inside Greenville prison, the body of every mentally ill person wandering the streets of Greenville. This is the God who is absent from us; he is absent bodily, and he will come again bodily.

The doctrine of the ascension determines the shape of Christian existence today. It calls us away from the two alternatives that are most tempting to us as Christians: the alternative of worldliness and the alternative of withdrawal. If we are to be neither worldly nor withdrawn, how are we to be? The text provides, I think, the most helpful description of the shape of Christian existence. We are to be witnesses. "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

In closing, let me say a word about living a life of witness. Every Sunday when we receive the bread and the cup we are being trained to live lives of witness. When we receive Eucharist, we do something that is profoundly weak and profoundly inconsequential in the sight of this world. What could we possibly accomplish by sharing in this bread and this cup? This bread and this cup are not even enough to feed our whole congregation, let alone the entire world! And week after week we take this bread and this cup and nothing seems to change. And yet in faith we affirm that nothing that we do is more important to the world than our readiness to receive this bread and this cup. I do not mean this poetically or figuratively. It is really true that nothing that any of us does is more important to the world than our readiness to receive this bread and this cup. And I certainly do not mean this spiritually. The Eucharist is not merely a symbol of some other spiritual reality. Eucharist is neither this worldly nor other worldly. It is not about the here and now, nor is it about the there and then. Rather, Eucharist is about the here and then. Eucharist is a participation in the certain future of this world, a future that we cannot accomplish but only witness to by receiving this bread and this cup. When we eat this meal together, we attest to the gospel truth that it is not we, but Christ, who can redeem the world. And we attest, as well, that it is not some other world, but this world, that Christ is coming to redeem.

Our lives are to embody this Eucharistic witness. Judged by the worldly standards of the here and now, such lives will appear to be weak and insignificant. Judged by the standards of some withdrawal to a pie in the sky then and there, such lives will appear to be too concerned with the bodily and the earthly. But if we are faithful, then for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, our lives will witness to the here and then, to the future of this world, to the feast that Jesus is preparing for all of God's creatures. In faith, we have been given the knowledge of God's good future. May we live our lives as witnesses to that good future. Amen.