

**To Your Advantage**  
First UMC of Pocatello  
Ascension Sunday  
May 29, 2022

John 14:15-31; 16:7-15

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One of the most ancient summaries of Christian belief, the Apostles' Creed, proclaims about Jesus, *He ascended into heaven...* Among the other doctrines included in the creed – doctrines such as Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection – the Ascension is certainly one of the least explored and discussed, even though there's a whole Sunday every year that is dedicated to its remembrance. It's awkward to consider it within our modern worldview. Ascended into heaven? Do we mean up into the sky, or into the outer atmosphere, or somewhere out in the cold, emptiness of space? Where is this floating body, said to be alive forevermore at the right hand of the Father?

The biblical writers didn't know what we know about the structure of the cosmos. But they had faith, and they had a creative sense of how the story of salvation was unfolding around them and through them. For them, Jesus' Ascension was less about where Jesus went, and more about what his absence made possible.

In John's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, tells us, *It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you* (Jn. 16:7). The Ascension, the "going away" of Christ, sets in motion the next stage of discipleship. It is the bridge between the resurrected life of Jesus among his first-century followers and his ongoing presence with people in all times and places. Because Jesus has ceased to be *there* and there only, a single visible body at one place in time, he can pour out his Spirit upon us *all*, to manifest and multiply his presence, his Body, throughout the world.

Because of the Ascension, it can truly be said that Jesus is *here*, in Pocatello; *here*, in this room; *here*, in your own heart; *here*, in mine.

The Ascension pressed the disciples into the new age – the age of grace and faith, of freely receiving and passionately living in the power of Jesus' resurrection. They could never have been free to disperse through all the earth and

preach Christ according to each nation's context and needs; they could never have passed the message on to the next generation; they could never have learned the skill of spiritual discernment or cultivated trust in God's faithfulness, if Jesus had not gone away from them. It was their time to grow up.

Whereas Luke gives us the story of Jesus levitating into the clouds, I'm grateful that John's Gospel speaks of his departure in simple language and simple promise: *It is to your advantage that I go away.* It's like when a wise instructor recognizes that a student is ready to move on to a new teacher, or when a parent drops their kid off at college for the first time – *for you to grow into everything you're meant to be, I must leave you.* Only, those analogies break down, because with Jesus, the link remains unbroken; the Holy Spirit *is* his Spirit; Jesus does indeed go with us. But he does so by living in us, not walking among us.

His physical "going away" compels us to place our hope in things unseen and to depend on the presence of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells us that his Holy Spirit will remind us of all his teachings, convict and condemn the rulers of this world, and lead us into all truth – all through an inner witness. The Ascension invites us all to mature, to take our cues not from a visible pointing finger but from an invisible inner nudge; to be moved by what is disclosed to the heart by the Spirit, not by external propaganda or chaos; to make peace with absence and not pine for presence.

That is the hardest part, for me at least: making peace with absence without pining for presence. And yet, it's where the rubber meets the road with Ascension, and where the provision of God graciously meets our actual needs.

Throughout our lives, there are times when God seems to depart from us, when we are no longer capable of "seeing" or relating to God in ways that we had grown used to. What felt natural, direct, obvious, or verifiable ceases to work, to be satisfying. It feels like God has gone away! We can't reach out and touch what had been, for so long, right in front of us. Stuck, blocked, lost, or bored, we become sad, angry, or afraid. And there's no telling when it will happen – certainly, it can be during a major life threshold or in the midst of crisis, but also within the routine rhythms of an established life.

*Where has God gone? Where is Jesus?*

It can happen to our *idea* of God, our intellectual understanding of who God is or what God is like or what God cares about. For a person who relates to God as micromanager of events, an omnipotent sovereign, personal tragedy and trauma

can make that idea of God untenable, even cruel, and cause them to grope about for a new way of experiencing God, perhaps as the Crucified One who suffers with them. Or befriending people from different backgrounds might set in motion a process of disentangling the essentials of faith from all the cultural assumptions and baggage that get encrusted around it. It's eventually freeing, but for a long time that process is fraught with loss, and it's hard to understand who God will be on the other side of the journey.

*Jesus, where are you?*

We can also encounter absence in our *felt experiences* of God. We've associated God with a warm feeling of acceptance, or with a distant rational coolness, or with the passion of protest and advocacy. We've prayed or worshipped in a way that inspired us and helped us grow. We had a community, a family, or a mentor who mediated God to us in a way that was familiar, that provided a strong foundation. But now our typical feelings are fading. Our ways of praying and worshiping leave us empty. Our community has disappointed us, or maybe we realize that we were too dependent on them, that we want to know things for ourselves. We feel estranged.

*Jesus, where are you?*

It can happen to our *idea* of God; it can happen to our *experience* of God. And, most painfully, it can happen to our *hope in God*, to our baseline conviction that all things work together for those who love Jesus, that in Jesus God has overcome the world.

When life bombards us with violence, despair, and chaos frequently enough; when, every day, we feel the systems and assumptions on which we've staked our lives giving way; when the planet suffers and bullets fly in classrooms and countries go to war and water runs dry, the strength of our hope wanes, and the things that we know are most essential to following Jesus feel more and more fruitless, stymied, and absurd: love and forgiveness of enemies, liberation of the poor and oppressed, patient and faithful intercession, hope in things unseen. We do what Jesus has asked of us, but it seems like the New Creation we have been promised slips right through our fingers.

Our hope falters. That, too, can happen. We need to be honest about it.

*Where is Jesus?*

Friends, here is the good news of the Ascension: *It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you* (Jn. 16:7). When Jesus “goes away,” he leaves us in the perfect position to receive *more* – not less – of himself.

Let me say it again: When Jesus “goes away,” he leaves us in the perfect position to receive *more* – not less – of himself.

**He will not leave us orphaned.** He will send us the Holy Spirit. We may struggle with our *ideas* – but we will have him. We may struggle with our *feelings* – but we will have him. We may struggle to *hope* – but we will have him. The trust we had formerly placed in these things must be placed fully again in the Holy Spirit, for the truth of the Gospel does not depend upon *our* wisdom and strength but upon the power of Christ’s redemption and resurrection living in us.

When we experience the absence of God, the ground is being cleared for a new and better thing. The time is ripe for maturing. The Spirit will come to us. And so, seasons of absence become times for listening, risking, searching, and experimenting.

These past few weeks, my own hope has been challenged. Confronted with these mass shootings in Buffalo and Uvalde, I have cried out, “God, where are you? Where is your love, your wisdom? Where is your purifying fire, your holiness and righteousness? Where is the narrow path that will lead us home to your peace?”

And then I remember the Ascension, and that the answer to every question about God’s absence is this: *God is found right here, right now. I can control nothing but my own attention to the Spirit. The Advocate has come to me. I must step out into this void, this emptiness, this chaos trusting that I will not fall, that it is to my advantage, and perhaps, God willing, to the advantage of others, that I must do this.*

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.