

The Message of the Ascension: Presence

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Years ago I asked a friend why he thought we didn't celebrate the feast of the Ascension more enthusiastically. He offered two reasons: because it didn't fall on a Sunday (now- years later – in many parts of the country, we are celebrating it on a Sunday) and, secondly, no one gets any presents. It sounded funny at the time, but recently, reflecting on the meaning of the Ascension, I realize it's a "more-than-worth-celebrating" feast of our faith.

At first glance, we might see the ascension as the absence of Jesus. Yet, the Ascension is all about the presence, not the absence of Jesus. The apostles did not understand the ascension to mean that Jesus was no longer with them. They expressed no grief or disappointment.

Instead they "returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (Luke 24:52).

That's not the emotion you feel when you lose your best friend. The ascension did not mean they lost something. The apostles gained something. Jesus' ascension brought him closer to them -- and to us -- than he was before. He left us on that mountain so that he might be with us in Detroit -- and in Washington and Iraq and throughout our world. He was taken from our physical sight so that he might come to us -- everyone -- wherever we are.

The Ascension is not about absence; it's about presence. Jesus told us, "I will be with you all days even to the end of the world." The words of the third Eucharistic Prayer for Masses with Children (spoken to God the Father) proclaims this clearly: "Jesus now lives with you in glory, but he is also here on earth, among us."

Thus, this mystery of the Ascension makes a significant difference to us:

Jesus told his disciples that in order for the Holy Spirit to come, he had to return to the Father. The rather limited physical presence of Jesus (which could only be shared by a few disciples) had to be withdrawn so that the universal presence of Jesus might become available forever to everyone all over the world.

Secondly, the Ascension tells us finally and completely who Jesus really is. The picture of Jesus returning to God the Father enables us to let go of previous and incomplete pictures of Jesus.

Certainly Jesus is the baby at Bethlehem, but that's not who he is now. He is the teacher of the Sermon on the Mount, but we know much more than just a record of his words. Jesus died on the cross, but that's not where he is today.

The Ascension adds a final and critical photograph to the album of who Christ is and what he does. He is ascended – once more with the Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, Ruler of Life and Conqueror of Death, the ruler of all human history. Jesus is alive and well and is still doing many things everyday. It is a lot more important that we see what Jesus is doing, than wondering and worrying about what he “would” do.

And third, the Ascension of Jesus gives us something to do. Jesus commanded the apostles (and us) to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey his commandments, to be his followers – to live like he did. With one stroke Jesus removed any and all ethnic and racial barriers. For his command was that all people of all nations are to be invited and are to share in the communion of the church. There is also to be no barrier between the apostles/disciples (us) and those to whom they are called to serve, for all commandments apply to all people.

The Ascension is all about Presence – a challenging one!