

Up . . . and away
Acts 1:6-14
Sermon by Mark Schloneger
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The very first verses of Acts tell us that after Jesus was crucified and died, he appeared to the disciples over a period of forty days. He spoke about the kingdom of God.

On one occasion, the writer of Acts tells us, disciples not to leave Jerusalem until they were baptized with the Holy Spirit. Then, after he had told them this,

*. . . they gathered around him and asked him,
“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”*

*He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates
the Father has set by his own authority.
But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you;
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.”*

*After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes,
and a cloud hid him from their sight.
They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going,
when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.
“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky?
This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven,
will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”*

*Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives,
a Sabbath day’s walk from the city.
When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying.
Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas,
Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot,
and Judas son of James.
They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women
and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (Acts 1:6-14, NRSV)*

This past Thursday, May 21st quietly passed,
and you didn’t even know that it was Eat More Fruits & Vegetables Day.
And that’s a shame, because no matter how much fruit and how many vegetables you ate that day,
you were supposed to eat more.
And you didn’t.
I’m disappointed in you.

Thursday, May 21 was also Ascension Day.
At least in my experience, this Christian holiday has barely registered
above Eat More Fruits & Vegetables Day,
I imagine that’s true for some of you, too.

I think one of the reasons why this day often gets neglected
is because we don't know what to do with it, even how to think about it.
How do we feel about Jesus being taken up, up, up, into the sky
until a cloud hides him from his disciples watching below?

Is it a day of celebration?
The day when Jesus, the King of Kings, begins his reign from above?
Or is it a day of lament, fasting, even mourning?
The day when Jesus leaves his disciples behind?
That last way is how the Amish have traditionally understood it.
"The days will come," Jesus said,
"when the bridegroom will be taken away from them,
and then they will fast in those days." (Luke 5:35)

We talk so much of Jesus' presence with us,
with his followers, with the church.
But what do we have to say about Jesus' absence from us,
from his followers, from . . . the church?

I know that this isn't normally how we like to think of things.
It can even make us uncomfortable.
And so our gut reaction is to immediately say
"What do you mean, absence? Jesus is always present with us."
And, of course, we can cite verses to support that point.

But verses like those really don't really answer the question – they beg the question:
How is Jesus with us, with his followers, with the church?
I think Jesus' presence has something to do with his absence.

Before I go on, I want to acknowledge that some of my thoughts this morning
have been influenced by Justin Heinzekehr in his book,
The Absent Christ: An Anabaptist Theology of the Empty Tomb (Cascadia, 2019).
It feels uncomfortable to cite a book when the author is a part of this congregation,
particularly because I'm sure that I will mischaracterize what he's written.
But like all good books, this book has helped me to think in new ways
and to make connections that I hadn't seen before.
So Justin, thank you.

Jesus' presence has something to do with his absence.
That sounds like a paradox that can't be reconciled, doesn't it?
But's it's only irreconcilable if we make the mistake of thinking that absence means nothingness.

Absence is not nothing.
As anyone who has ever grieved can tell you, you can feel an absence,
you can even take the shape of it.
it can touch you in the core of your being,
it can lure you, beckon you, pull you.

As his disciples watched, before their very eyes,
Jesus was taken up and away from them,
and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going.
Jesus's absence – in the empty tomb, in his ascension, both times –
leaves a void in the lives of disciples.

This void, this absence.
They can feel it. Jesus is the shape of it.
It touches the core of their being,
and it's luring them, beckoning them, pulling them.
The question is: towards what?

Scientists will tell you that, when you sit down to drink a glass of iced mint tea with a straw,
you won't actually suck the tea through the straw.
You need to stop congratulating yourself – you're not doing the real work.
No, what you're actually doing is reducing the air pressure within the straw,
allowing the higher atmospheric pressure in the rest of the glass
to push the tea up the straw and into your mouth.
It's a scientific law: gases under higher pressure will always move to areas of lower pressure.
In other words, it's the absence of pressure – the absence --
that causes the movement, the flow, the energy to push the tea up the straw.
We see this happening everywhere:
it explains how our weather changes, how birds take flight, how blood flows through our body.

In Romans, chapter 1, the apostle Paul says this:
"Since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature,
invisible though they are,
have been understood and seen through what has been made." (Romans 1:20)

Can the movement of gases help us understand who God is,
how Christ is present with us,
where God's Spirit flows?

Genesis, chapter 1, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth,
the earth was a formless . . . void, and darkness covered the face of the deep,"
and God moved, sweeping over the waters, hovering over the void,
speaking Creation into existence.

Throughout the Old Testament, we see this pattern repeatedly:
God moves towards the void, the emptiness, the absence of power.
In the law, the prophets, the psalms, the writings:
God defends the weak, upholds the cause of the poor,
and brings justice to the oppressed.

It continues in the New Testament,
God is like a shepherd who leaves his ninety-nine sheep
to rescue one that is lost.
God is like is like a woman who searches and searches for one lost coin.
God is like is a Father moving, running towards his wayward son.
God is like a mother hen, protecting her chicks with her body.
Jesus is God willingly, humbly, steadily, moving toward absence,
toward the places and the people on the underside of power,
whose breath, life, and spirit are being sucked away from them.

As the Christ hymn in Philippians says,
Though Jesus was in the very nature God,
he made himself . . . *nothing*, taking the nature of a servant,
and humbling himself to the point of death on a cross --
to the point of absence.
For this reason,
the Father God exalted him to the highest place in heaven, earth, and under the earth.
(Philippians 2:6-11)

Jesus made himself nothing. Why?
Because God consistently moves towards absence, towards powerlessness.
God exalted him to the highest place.
Why? Because God consistently moves towards absence, towards powerlessness.

There is a void in the life of disciples.
This void, this absence.
We can feel it. Jesus is the shape of it.
It touches the core of our being,
and it is luring us, beckoning us, pulling us.
The question is: towards what? Towards whom?
How can we serve an absent Christ?

*I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you invited me in,
I needed clothes and you clothed me,
I was sick and you looked after me,
I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*
. . . *'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.'*
You did it to me. (Matthew 25:35-36, 40)

Just as gases under high pressure will move toward areas of lower pressure,
God moves toward, and identifies with,
people and places where the breath, the life, is being sucked out of them,
for whatever reason -- sickness, grief, oppression, discrimination, or poverty.
God is moving toward people on the underside of power,
wherever they are found -- whether in the church or outside of it.

I've now been a pastor of Berkey Avenue for over a year.
I've been a part of us long enough to know that Berkey is full of people
who care for each other, who enjoy each other,
who bring meals to the sick and the grieving,
who give money to those in financial need,
who see their work as service to Christ.
This is a sign of the Spirit, at work within us, moving us into Christ's presence.

However -- and you probably knew that was coming --
however the point when we all become settled and satisfied with ourselves --
with our worship, our mission, our structures, our unity,
our statements, our politics, our theology,
that's the point when we have filled the space of Christ's absence . . .

with ourselves.

This pandemic has made it clear that, for the most part,
we as a congregation are not made up of people who are living on the edge of collapse.
The unemployment rate in this country has reached depression levels.
Yet, the only thing that has changed for many of us has been the location of our work.
With good reason, there are people in our community and country
who are desperate to get their full paychecks and are frustrated
with the restrictions that prevent it.
With good reason, we want our community, our state, or country
to move slowly in opening things back up.
But we've got the resources to wait out a quarantine, we know what we'd do if we got sick,
and we know who we'd call if we didn't.

The church – this church -- can never be settled.
The church isn't so much the presence of Christ in the sense that Christ's presence is static -- with us.
And the Spirit is not a power that we possess.
No, she's the energy, the power, the flow that possesses us
pushing us towards those who are not heard, towards those who are not seen, even by us.
The absence of Christ, the shape of Christ,
lures us, beckons us, and pulls us
towards the margins of power; wherever it is found.

There, we will find Christ's presence,
and once we do,
we keep moving,
for that is what God is doing.