

## A new kind of presence

Homily for 5.16.2021 (Celebration of Ascension Day)

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*In the name of the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit*

Starting very early in the pandemic, I began to FaceTime or Zoom call with my parents every day. We talked fairly often before March of last year, but to connect every day over video was a substantial increase in how much we saw them. We have maintained this practice throughout the last 14 months, and it's become a part of our daily routine. We chat and compare supper recipes, and our toddler often demands a grandparent performance of the Itsy-Bitsy Spider.

Around the same time last year, when things were shut down and so very scary, my three best friends from high school began to text much more regularly, sending pictures, goofy videos, and texts of support, particularly to the friend who is a nurse. We've done some Zoom game nights with my niece and nephew and played online trivia with some friends.

We also have found ourselves paying more attention to what is happening in the neighborhood: noticing how the bloodroot only opens its little white flowers if it's warm enough in the afternoon; wondering if the emergency room doctor next door might need a frozen lasagna; trying to remember who lives alone and might want to chat on the sidewalk a little longer than usual.

The pandemic has in so many ways been marked by distance. We've coined a new term: social distancing. Everywhere we go, there are signs asking us to be physically distant from each other. We're constantly reminded of things we are not doing, people we are not seeing, places we are not going.

And yet, over the last 14 months, I know that many of us have also practiced new ways of closing that gap, working to stay present with people, even when we can't be physically close.

This week, we are celebrating two things: our high school seniors who are graduating this year and all they have brought to the community of St. John's; and the feast of Jesus's ascension into heaven after the resurrection.

It could be tempting to think of both Senior Sunday and Ascension Day as being primarily about distance. About absence. About what is no longer. We could focus primarily on the *departure* of the high school seniors among us. We could look primarily at Jesus's ascension as a story about *leaving*.

Our seniors will close the door on their high school days and begin the next chapter of their lives. Many of them will pack their bags and laptops, climb into cars or planes, and head away from home. Similarly, in the ascension story, Jesus is here and then he's gone. He is standing with the disciples and then, depending on what part of Scripture you're reading, he withdraws and leaves them, or he is lifted up into

heaven on a cloud. It's easy to think of the ascension as a story of absence--as the final chapter or the closing curtain.

But to do that, I think, would be to miss an opportunity to honor our graduating seniors in a more meaningful way, and to miss a critical point in the story of the ascension.

On Senior Sunday we recognize all that our graduating high school seniors have done to enrich the community of St. John's. We can think of this not as a moment of departure, but as a new kind of presence. Perhaps many of these seniors will no longer be physically present with us in the pews on Sundays, but the parts they have played in the life of our community live on. The joy they have brought, the roles they have filled in our worship services, the questions they have asked about God, about church, about pilgrimage – all these things have changed and transformed our faith community. Their physical presence may be different after their graduation, but the ways that they have shaped this community will remain, rooted in the DNA of St. John's.

We can also think about the ascension as a new kind of presence. In our reading today from Acts, the disciples watch as Jesus is lifted up into heaven. They are standing there, somewhat stunned, looking up to where he has gone. And then, two figures in white robes appear, and ask the disciples what I think is one of the most important and profound messages for us as Christians: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

This is the beginning of the book of Acts. It is the beginning of the early church. It is not the end of anything. And the message here, I believe, is clear. It is a message about being present and connected in a new way. The work, these heavenly figures tell the disciples, is not up in the sky. Instead, their work, their role, the next chapter of their lives is around them on earth. This is a moment of transformation and change. Their lives following the person of Jesus on earth have ended. But their lives as disciples have in many ways just begun.

And, in this dramatic moment, there is another kind of presence that arrives. In Acts, before Jesus departs into heaven, he tells his disciples "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses." In Luke, he tells them to "stay here until you have been clothed with power from on high." Jesus is telling his disciples that they will continue to be surrounded by the love, power, and presence of God, through the Holy Spirit, even after the ascension. And he is calling the disciples—and us—to a new way of acting in the world.

After the ascension, the core questions facing the disciples are actually the same ones we face today as Christians: What does it mean to follow a Jesus who is farther away from us than 6 feet of social distance? How are we to be disciples of Christ now that Jesus is no longer with us as a physical person? How are we to listen for the presence of the Holy Spirit? How will we know if we are following the way of Jesus? What does it truly mean to be Jesus's witnesses?

To try to begin to answer these questions, we can turn to the story of the ascension once again.

In this story, we see that Jesus, before he ascends and becomes present in a new way, points the disciples back to the ancient teachings of their faith. The Law of Moses. The Psalms. The Prophets. This story tells us that to follow Jesus after the ascension, we can call upon the wisdom of our ancestors. We can look to those who have come before us. We can think about our sacred texts and our family stories. We can remember the saints, both those from history and those in our daily lives, and draw inspiration and courage from them.

This story also tells us that to follow Jesus, we must look around, notice, and be present in the world around us. “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” The way forward is not up, but rather out. We are called to be in the world, not only within the walls of our church. We are called to reflect on how we are disciples in our daily life and work, and how we might deepen that discipleship. We are called to be with our neighbors. To notice what is happening around us and to respond with Christian love.

Finally, this story is one of mercy and love. As Jesus prepares for his ascension, the disciples are told, first and foremost, that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.” The disciples aren’t given blueprints for new church buildings. They aren’t given a list of who to go and recruit as new Christians. They aren’t given a list of things to do and not to do. They are instructed by Jesus to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, and to show love, mercy, and compassion to ALL the nations. This is a message about being merciful and filled with love. These are the instructions the disciples are given as they begin a new chapter of their ministry. This is the work we are also invited into in our lives as Christians.

So on this day, let’s think of senior Sunday as a day to reflect on the indelible presence that our graduating high schoolers have left on our community. Let’s think about the ascension not as a story of distance or absence, but rather as the beginning of our lives as witnesses to the radical love of Jesus. And let’s remember that we are called to look not up but out. That we are called to go out into the world, sharing the hope, mercy and love that are at the heart of our faith. *Amen.*