

Our Gospel reading today describes the joy of the apostles as they watched Jesus ascend into heaven. "...*They returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*" I think Ascension Day is thought of as a very joyful day – it's difficult, for example, to even find Ascension Day hymns that are *not* full-out joyful. But I wish there were more hymns that captured the mix of emotions that the Ascension of our Lord must have evoked.

Yes, he ascended into heaven - and everything must have finally made sense to the apostles. All those confusing parables and predictions at last clicked into place. The one they had believed to be the Messiah, but was then crucified to death like a common criminal, who rose and walked again among them, was lifted into heaven with a farewell blessing on his lips – they were right all along! Jesus was the Anointed One, the Son of God! I don't doubt that there was joy in abundance, especially in hindsight. But on that day, he vanished from them, and their beloved Lord was lost again. Imagine the apostles five minutes afterward: shock; confusion; disbelief; wonder. And there they were again, without him.

Twenty one centuries later, we know that Jesus' ascension was a pivotal component of the plan set in motion at his incarnation. He came into human form to live and suffer as one of us; he suffered the cruelest of deaths to gather up all of our sins in that death; he descended to the dead for three days, conquering Hell and sweeping all of God's creation into alignment for the final Judgement Day. He rose again, and walked among us, making his wounds known so that we would know it was him. He ascended into heaven and was restored to his place within the Trinity, where his saving reach could now extend farther than the cosmos, for all time. Twenty one centuries later I know this, and I drop to my knees in gratitude for all of this. And yet a part of me, "Small Me," still wishes he could just be here with us, in human form, where we could rest at his feet, and hear his voice; where we could provide for him some small offering or comfort, and be able to tell him how much we love him. "Small Me" is, in fact, *sad* at the thought of his ascension, and I wouldn't be surprised if the apostles felt the same mix of feelings.

But I get it. "Big Me" understands that his ascension was not only preordained, but was *required* as the only way for him to resume the full reach of God, to all people through all places, and throughout all time – the only reach with a scope broad enough for almighty God. Jesus in human form could only reach so far – and as much as we all long to have been there with him, I know that his reach was meant for so much more than any little rag-tag bunch of believers, no matter how devoted.

His absence, as much as we might not like it, is required: for us to evolve into being the best and fullest possible version of ourselves. His absence is required: for us to grow into his vision of who we are meant to be: his Body in the world. His absence is required for us to celebrate him in the Eucharist. His absence is required for us to seek him, and to serve him.

There's a tradition in some churches where, on Ascension Day, the flame of the Paschal Candle is snuffed. I know that sounds harsh, but the truth is, his ascension means he is with us here on earth in human form no longer. And so the Light of Christ that we lit at the Great Vigil of Easter to commemorate that spark of life bringing his heart back to beating, that brought him back from the dead - that light is not with us anymore. His light is meant

to shine through us, to be the light of the world in his name. And so the flame is snuffed out, and the light is changed from flame to smoke – which is freed from the confines of fire, into the release of smoke: free now to pervade all things, to be present in all things.

Jesus Christ is not with us any longer in human form, and this *is* a loss to us, just as if we were present on that day with the disciples when he lifted up into the heavens. But he remains a present and constant joy to us, present in all things with us, reaching through all time and all space, and through all of his creation, “...*as far as the East is from the West, one scarred hand to another...*” And he promised all of us that he will come again, for our final judgement, purification, and release into eternal life with him forever.

So “Big Me” can comfort “Small Me” with the reminder that God needs to be God, and that indeed we can sing with great joy in thanksgiving for all that he did, and for all he has promised. Christ is risen, and ascended! Alleluia!

Amen.

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