

You Are Not Alone



Romans 8:22 "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, (we) groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, (while we wait for) the redemption of our bodies."

I have spoken the words countless times in my years as a priest, at the side of a hospital bed before surgery, in a hospice room before dying, at the kitchen table of a house suddenly filled with tragedy and sorrow. "You are not alone," I have said reassuringly. You are not alone. This statement is for me one of the principal messages of the Christian Church. You are not alone. You are part of something larger than yourself. You are a member of a community of friends and family that care about one another, who care about you. You matter. What happens

to you, matters. Your life is important to others. You are not alone.

After a year of pandemic and self-quarantine, these words seem even more vital to me as we return to in-person worship at St. John's today and in-person gatherings in our community. Over the last many months, many of us have felt alone, desperately alone at times. For over a year now, we have seen our colleagues only in ZOOM meetings, visited with our kids only on Facetime, communicated with grandma only through the window of her nursing home. Many of us have been hospitalized, and many have died, with no family or friends at hand, because visitors were restricted and forbidden there. Many died alone.

Now, I know that life for all of us is hard, and at times we all feel isolated and alone, and sometimes we even get overwhelmed by those feelings, with an overpowering sense of anxiety and fear. On occasions such as this, I am so reminded of that old Irish sailor's prayer, which goes something like, "O Lord, your ocean is so vast, and my boat is so small, I feel so alone upon the great deep." We all feel vulnerable, weak, fragile, and alone at times in our lives. We all need one another. We need the bond of our common humanity and mutual affection for our very health and well-being. We need the presence and love of God in our midst, reassuring us that we are not alone, and that we matter, especially now as we move from

our self-quarantine and isolation back into the larger world. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves. . . (we) groan inwardly while we wait for . . . the redemption of our bodies. . . with sighs too deep for words."

So then, --- according to the seasonal biblical story, ten days ago the Resurrected Jesus took a small group of his disciples to the outskirts of the city of Jerusalem, to a mount called Olivet, and Jesus left them there. He departed from their company, once and for all --- he ascended into heaven and vanished from their sight.

The imagery of the Ascension, of Jesus rising into the clouds from the brow of a hill in front of his disciples, while two angels explain what is happening to them, is not a particularly attractive scene to contemporary eyes. The idea of Jesus ascending into outer space is even a bit embarrassing. Thus, not surprisingly perhaps, the Feast of the Ascension has suffered in popularity in modern times. I suspect that none of you celebrated the feast in any fashion this year, even though it is a Major celebration of the Christian Church, in both the East and the West.

But the fundamental point of the story of the Ascension is that Jesus was gone, that he had really taken his leave this time; that the disciples were no longer going to bump into him

wandering about the hills of Galilee anymore, as had been happening for the last many days, as I hope the Easter sermon series illustrated. They were no longer to going to walk with him as they had on the Road to Emmaus, or talk with him as they had in the Upper Room so many times, and sit down and have breakfast with him again on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius. The Risen Jesus was gone, really and completely gone from them this time. They were not going to see him again as they had --- and neither are we. The essential feature of the post-Ascension story is Jesus' real absence from among us.

After Jesus had departed from their company, the disciples returned to Jerusalem as they had been told to do, and they went back to the Upper Room where they had gathered before, and they devoted themselves there, we are told, to prayer. This is a common human response to the loss of a loved one, gathering with friends in some familiar place, supporting one another in each other's grief and anxiety. We can feel so helpless and hurt and lonely and listless at times, so unable to do almost anything else but pray, often paralyzed by our isolation and anxiety. The disciples who had not responded particularly well to the Resurrection appearances must have been bewildered and even terrified by Jesus' absence. And I suspect that the words of their prayers in that Upper Room were not dissimilar to last Sunday's Collect, and especially to that haunting phrase

therein, "O Lord, we beseech thee, leave us not comfortless."
Leave us not comfortless.

Jesus apparently foresaw that he would be sorely missed and that his disciples would be hurting and anxious when he was gone, so he forewarned them of his departure and promised to send them a special advocate from God, a holy Comforter, a divine spirit to be present with them, so that they would not be alone.

For nine days they prayed, abandoned by Jesus and without any comforter in sight. It was a unique time in the life of the Christian community, those nine days after the Ascension and before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It was this episode that is the origin of the *novena*, the Roman Catholic practice of praying for a period of nine days for some special grace, at a time of some special need. We have all been there. Alone. Anxious. Wondering when our isolation will end, and what we will do, or how we will go on.

We have all felt abandoned at times, orphaned between the sudden loss of Jesus and waiting for the arrival of the Holy Spirit, caught between that which was so inspiring to us, so full of life, and then after its loss, lacking the inspiration to simply go on; times when God seems absent from us, gone away somewhere, leaving us behind and forgotten and comfortless; times when feel utterly alone and abandoned, like the Irish

fisherman upon the sea. Like the disciples in today's story, we can do little at times like that but gather close with friends and family and pray, pray fervently perhaps, but without ceasing, while waiting, waiting for the coming of the spirit, reassuring one another all the while that we are not alone, that God is faithful, longing for a divine spirit to return to our lives, longing for the breath of God to blow across our faces again, and fill us with life renewed.

On the tenth day, according to the story, the disciples were all gathered together in one place, as it was the day for the celebration of the Jewish feast of Weeks, called in Greek, Pentecost. It was at that time that the Comforter came among the disciples, and warmed their hearts and took away their anxiety, and inspired them, filling them with a burning faith and hope and power and energy. Their prolonged period of isolation was over, as ours now is. The trial has ended. The long days of quarantine finished, for the spirit of Jesus, his holy ghost, was felt amongst them again and they were glad and they rejoiced and they sang out ecstatically in new and different tongues, as we do here.

In fact, the lives of the disciples were dramatically altered at that moment of Pentecost. They were changed forever. For during the forty days of the appearances of the Resurrected Jesus, for Eastertide, the disciples still were frightened,

confused, and disbelieving in their hearts; they still hid behind closed doors in fear of the Jewish authorities, they were surprised by the empty tomb and did not believe the witnesses who reported having seen the Risen Jesus, they even doubted their own eyes when they themselves saw him. The disciples remained confused and confounded all during that first Easter season, a band of weak and bewildered individuals who did not know what to make of all of this, or what would become of all of this, or what would become of them.

Yet after Pentecost, after the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them, after the Comforter arrived, they became indeed an inspired group who spoke out in many tongues about the things that they had witnessed in their lives. After Pentecost, the disciples apparently felt empowered for the first time, and for the first time boldly went out into the streets and marketplaces from behind the closed doors where they had hid, to preach for the first time, to risk their lives to tell their story, and risk they did. For the stories from Acts that are the traditional first readings in the Easter Season tell of their preaching and their conviction, tell of those who were arrested and imprisoned for speaking out, of the riots and the beatings and the stonings that their forceful words incited in others, after Pentecost, after they came out from behind the closed doors where they lived in fear. The disciples of Jesus were

changed forever, not by witnessing the Resurrection, but by receiving the Holy Spirit.

And never would that Spirit leave us, they were told. Never would we be so abandoned again. The coming of the Holy Spirit was the birth of the Church, the founding of a place of inspired joy and celebration, this place of refuge and peace. The coming of the Holy Comforter is the birthday of a community that is still celebrated thousands of years later, on Pentecost, as we celebrate it today in grand fashion, together. For we celebrate the birth of a place, of a congregation, of a group of people where we are never ever really alone, where a Comforter can always be found amongst us, where the Spirit of God always resides, and where we are blessed. Our long season of waiting, of groaning for redemption, of escape from our isolation and anxiety, and of returning to the streets inspired and alive, is here and now. Thanks be to God, we are not alone! AMEN.