

He Withdrew from Them and was Carried up to Heaven

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Commencement
Western Seminary
May 11, 2015

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Biblical Text: Luke 24:49-51 and Acts 1:6-11

Congratulations! The long, hard march is coming to an end! No more papers to write, no more exams to worry about, no more burning of the midnight oil . . .

Or so you think! In truth, there will be many more reports, papers, and sermons to write, many Saturday nights when your lamp will burn long past midnight, many questions that will puzzle you far beyond any question in an exam during these last three or so years. You have come to an end, and for that you must be congratulated. But you are also at a beginning.

Significantly, in three days it will be Ascension Day, and the lectionary texts assigned for that day are both an ending and a beginning: the end of the Gospel of Luke, and the beginning of Acts. In these two texts combined, we see the end of an important chapter in the disciples' life, and the beginning of another.

In a way, that is what a graduation is all about. That is why, even though it takes place at the end of your formal studies, we call it a "commencement," that is, a beginning.

Seminary has often been compared with the three years that the disciples spent with Jesus. I

well remember the time when, in the unbridled enthusiasm of my youthful years, I asked why I had to go to seminary before going out to preach the gospel. After all, the first disciples never went to seminary! And the answer I was given was that this was not true, for the disciples attended the best seminary of all as they spent three years following Jesus and listening to his teaching.

There are many reasons why that argument does not quite hold water. But there is indeed a parallelism that comes to sharp focus on graduation day: Just as in a way graduation is saying goodbye to a school that has been our community and the center of our lives for the last years, so in the ascension Jesus takes leave of his disciples. As he had warned them, they would now see him no more. After all those years, after all those miracles, after all those marvelous words and astounding examples of love, they will see him no more!

And not only that, but this Lord who had never taken them beyond the borders of Galilee, Samaria and Judea is now telling them that they are to go to the ends of the earth!

Now each of you, like those first disciples, is sent out. Granted, the seminary is not Jesus! But, like those early disciples, you will no longer have a favorite professor to run to with a burning question, or to hold your hand in a moment of perplexity. Questions and issues that you have never even suspected will arise, and you will no longer be in a classroom where you can deal with them as merely intellectual matters. You will be in a world and in a church that urgently

demands engagement.

No wonder those first disciples cannot quite accept it all — the leave-taking and the unprecedented task before them— and remain there gazing up at heaven! What do we do now? If he had simply left us when he died, we could just mourn him and return to Galilee, to our fishing boats and our counting tables. But he has risen, and this means that we cannot simply go back to our former lives and our former security.

But now, a few fleeting days after his victorious resurrection, he is leaving us again, and he has set before us a mission far beyond our wildest dreams or our greatest fears. To the ends of the earth!?

Yes, he has promised us the gift of the Spirit. But we do not quite know what that is or when it will come. And, even when it comes, it will not be the same as seeing him in the flesh, having his guidance at every turn of our lives.

As we today approach this coming Ascension Day, there are two dimensions to the day that must be considered. One is the dimension of victory, and to that we shall return. But the other, which we often forget, is the dimension of absence.

In a way, Jesus himself had prepared them for that absence. He had told them countless

parables about absence: A man distributed talents among his disciples and went to a distant land. A master left his house in the care of his head servant. Another planted a vineyard and went to another country for a long time. A bridegroom didn't show up when he was expected.

All of these parables, parables that we usually call "parables of stewardship," are also parables of absence. Because that is precisely what a steward is called to do: to administer the master's goods while the master is absent. What a steward must do is, while the master is present, to learn as much as possible of the master's will, so that when the master is absent the steward knows how to manage things in a way that is faithful to the master's will. The steward may wish that the master were there to provide direction at every turn. But the master is absent, and the steward must manage.

But this absence has its purpose. It is not an absence of indifference, but of love. As Kierkegaard put it, "When the child is learning to walk alone, what must the mother do? She must make herself invisible. Her tenderness toward him is the same . . . indeed, it probably grows greater. . . The child, on the other hand, may not always understand." Or, as Dame Julian wrote centuries earlier, "The mother may sometimes suffer the child to fall and to be distressed in various ways, for its own benefit."

The child is given room to fall so that it may learn to walk. Stewards must be left alone so that they may learn to act as the master would have them do. True stewardship has an effect not

only on the things managed, but also on the steward himself or herself. True stewardship is part of that process by which, as Calvin would say, “we are sanctified, that is, consecrated to the Lord unto real purity of life, having our hearts molded to obey his will.”

Have no illusions. As you leave this place and go into whatever ministry you are called to—ordained ministry or lay ministry—, there will be many times when you will feel as those disciples must have felt right after the ascension: Where has he gone? Why has he given me this heavy burden, and left me to fend for myself? The seminary didn’t quite prepare me for this! This is part of ministry. Ministry is not just walking around the garden with Jesus. In this regard, we do well to heed the warning of Henri Nouwen: “The great temptation of the ministry is to celebrate only the presence of the Lord while forgetting his absence.”

If we forget that even in God’s absence there is still love, we shall be like a child left to walk alone who, instead of walking, simply lies down and bawls. Such a child will never learn to walk. And a minister who is unable to see God’s love even in the apparent absence of God will soon burn out.

But that is not the end of the story. The Lord whom the disciples now see disappearing into the clouds is the same Lord who has promised them: “I shall not leave you alone, but I shall send you another Comforter.” The mother waiting beyond the door for her child to walk to her has not left the child alone. Her spirit is there with him at every step, even though he cannot see it.

But the mother has told him that he will be able to walk. And walk he will.

It is not always easy to trust that Spirit through whom the absent Lord is present. We can well imagine the bewilderment of those early disciples as they returned to Jerusalem from Mount Olivet. What do we do now? Peter has a solution: Let's reorganize. We were twelve. We are supposed to be twelve. Let's find another to take the place of Judas.

I can well sympathize with that. Indeed, in the church today, whenever things do not seem to be going well, or when we are perplexed as to what to do, there is one thing we can do: We reorganize!

Perhaps it would be better simply to ask the apparently absent Lord to make his presence known among us by means of the Spirit. To remember that after the absence of Ascension comes the presence of Pentecost. To remember that as in the case of the child who walks toward the corner beyond which he will meet his mother, the Spirit of the Absent One is with us. To remember that we are not only the people of the Ascension, but also of Pentecost. To remember that the Spirit is ready to show us the way through Scripture, through prayer, through the community of faith.

But back to the Ascension. I said earlier that there are two dimensions to the Ascension. One is absence. The other is victory. The Ascension we celebrate this week is more than the happy

ending to a story with its ups and downs, like any human story. It is more than an explanation of what happened to the body of Christ after the resurrection —an explanation of why he is absent. It is also and above all the affirmation of his presence at the right hand of God. It is also the first fruits of the promise of our presence there with him.

Back in December we celebrated the incarnation of God in Christ. We rejoiced that God became one of us. Now, in the Ascension, we celebrate that one of us is at the right hand of God. John Calvin would say that “since he entered heaven in our flesh, as if in our name, it follows, as the apostle says, that in a sense we already ‘sit with God in the heavenly places in him,’ so that we do not await heaven with a bare hope, but in [Christ] our Head already possess it.” And centuries earlier Irenaeus, Athanasius, Basil the Great, and many others would say that in Christ God assumed human nature so that human nature may share in the divine life.

Irenaeus used a very graphic example. If we are at a funeral, and the dead man suddenly raises his head, we know that the entire man is alive, and that all of him will arise after his head. This is what happened on Easter morning: The Head arose, living, from among the dead, so that we, members of his body, too, will rise with him. And this is also what happened on Ascension Day: The Head rose to the heavenly places at the right hand of God, so that we, too, will rise with him.

And, since at a place such as this it never hurts to quote Calvin, this is also why, amidst the

debates in the sixteenth century about how it is that Christ is present in communion, Calvin made it clear that it is not so much a matter of how Christ comes down from heaven to us as it is a matter of how, by the power of the Spirit and in the midst of the community of faith, we are taken to his presence in the heavenly places, where we are given a foretaste of the final banquet of the wedding of the Lamb. The ascended Christ is also the Christ of our ascension.

But back to this commencement. Here we are, on this eleventh day of May, in the year 2015. For some of us, those to whom this commencement is dedicated, it is probably a time of excitement mixed with puzzlement and probably even fear. For others, these days mark the beginning of retirement, or the beginning of a career, or the beginning of a family. For some, this may just be a day like any other day. But in truth, no matter whether we are graduating or not, we are all in a commencement day, a day of new beginnings. No matter what our situation may be, we are all commencing. Every day we are beginning a new day, a new march into the future. Every day is the beginning of a new adventure.

In this adventure all of us—particularly those of you who after today will be moving into new fields of ministry—all of us must live in uncertainty. Like those disciples returning from Mount Olivet, we wish the Lord were still physically with us; that we could see him, ask him for directions, hold on to his hand like a toddler holds on to its mother's hand.

But no. This Lord who has gone ahead of us to the heavenly places, this master who has made

us his stewards in his absence, this mother who awaits us around the corner, wishes us to learn to walk on our own so that we may be more like him —much as the mother who wishes for the child to walk so that he may be more like her. And, just as even in the absence of the mother her spirit watches over the child, so in the absence of our Lord his Spirit watches over us—not to hold our hand so that we will not stumble, but letting us know that the absent Lord is indeed present, that even with our hesitant steps we are approaching the one who is already ahead of us in the heavenly places. And that, like the mother who embraces the child when he finally turns the corner, he is there urging us on and waiting for the day when we, too, will embrace him.

Meanwhile, walk in faith, stumble in faith, and the absent Lord who is present everywhere will guide you to that final day!

Amen.

