

*A sermon given on Sunday, May 16, 2010,
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

Out of Sight Again

When our children are very young, they are apt to cry when we set them down and go into another room. Most infants will do that. According to child-development experts, “out of sight” is not just “out of mind” for the very small child. “Out of sight” does not mean simply “away.” It means “gonzo!” Like, gone for good. No longer existent. For a small child who does not yet have any developed sense of time or space, “out of sight” means cosmically, permanently *gone*. Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as “object permanence,” akin to the more widely known syndrome of “separation anxiety.” Object permanence is the understanding that objects continue to exist even when they cannot be seen, heard, or touched.

Now, as adults, we know that the person who has walked off into Tucker Hall is still there, has not actually dissolved into non-existence. But at certain times of emotional vulnerability, we may still experience something like those childhood fears. We may have a lapse in the “object permanence” department. We may still feel that gut-dropping fear of permanent loss. When we say farewell to loved ones we see only rarely; when we kiss a spouse good-bye at the airport, or even when we put our small child on the school bus, we may feel the sting of panic at the prospect of loss. *“If I cannot see you, how can I know that you are all right? How can I know that I am all right?”*

Today is the Sunday after Ascension Day. Ascension Day was Thursday, the fortieth day after Easter. Ascension recalls the scriptural accounts of the departure of the resurrected Jesus. After his resurrection, for forty days the risen Christ appears to his friends and disciples. They see him, talk with him, share a fish fry or two with him. Just as Jesus had spent forty days in the wilderness preparing for his earthly ministry, so now the risen Jesus spends forty days back on earth preparing for his final place of authority. But then at Ascension, Jesus says farewell to his disciples. According to Luke’s account in the Book of Acts [1:8], he gives them these final words: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” And then, as the disciples are looking on, he is lifted up, and a cloud takes him out of their sight.

Now, we would expect that the disciples must have experienced some of that separation anxiety. Some real grief and sorrow, some real ‘object permanence’ issues would seem inevitable at the loss, once again, of their beloved Master. He dies; they grieve; he comes back; they rejoice; and now he’s gone again! Yet the gospels do not paint this as a sorrowful scene. There are no recorded pleas for Jesus to stay on longer; no tearful farewell speeches. No grief-stricken paralysis sets in after Jesus’ disappearance. According to Luke, “they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and spent all their time in the temple praising God.” [24:52-53]

Now, think for a minute. Think how different this is from the reaction of the disciples the first time Jesus left them. When Jesus departed from the disciples on Good Friday, they were completely undone. Just the night before, he had prayed that they would show forth the love he had given them, and remain unified. We heard that final prayer in today’s gospel from John. [17:20-26] But they did not especially show forth Christ’s love after his death, and they certainly did not remain unified. They scattered. They denied knowing him. They hid. They huddled behind locked doors in fear. So why is this second departure at Ascension so different? Why is it that this time they are not devastated at being left? Perhaps it is because this time Jesus has left them with a promise which they have come to believe: “I will not leave you comfortless ... I am sending upon you what my Father has promised ... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.”

To be sure, Jesus had promised this earlier as well, before his crucifixion. He had predicted that he would rise again, and he had prayed as in today's Gospel, that "those whom [God] has given me may be with me where I am, to see my glory." But that first time Jesus' departure was so awful, the prospect of the resurrection so unimaginable, that they either dismissed it or forgot it. Not this time. Not at the Ascension. This time they had met their Risen Lord, and heard and believed his words. The question is the same as it was the first time, the same as that little child's: "*If I cannot see you, how can I know that you are all right? How can I know that I am all right?*" But this time they have an answer, and that answer is the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Earlier this month at St. Paul's we held our third annual Service of Remembrance – a special Eastertide memorial for those who have lost someone they love. For some it was evident that the healing is well underway; for others the grief is still raw and palpable. Last week I received a note from a colleague of mine on the west coast – we are fellow members of a small group of clergy that supports one another with a monthly round-robin of news and encouragement. My friend stunned our little group with the word that she has just been diagnosed with a previously undetected but fully advanced cancer which is likely, even with treatment, to take her life within the year. For family members at a Service of Remembrance, for friends receiving hard news – at times of such loss or anticipated parting, the child inside us asks once again: "*If I cannot see you, how can I know that you are all right? How can I know that I am all right?*"

I feel certain that you know what I mean. I feel certain that, at some moment if not at this moment, you have been facing some similar loss of life or health – for yourself, or for someone you love. Or some other loss, perhaps. That of employment which has given your life meaning. Or the loss of a familiar home or routine. Perhaps someone you love is graduating this month, or moving away, or marrying and must now divide family loyalty. There are a million ways that life presents us with loss – maybe more. And not one of them is without some degree of anxiety, if not outright pain.

So the question I ask myself, and which I commend to you, is this: Am I to be as the disciples were at the first loss of their Master at Good Friday – paralyzed by fear and altogether without hope? Or can God's grace draw me forward to be with those disciples when they lose him at the Ascension parting instead – determined and confident of the love of their Master, with his physical presence or without it?

"Do not leave us comfortless," we prayed in today's opening Collect. And we trust that God does not. Jesus comforted the disciples at the Ascension with his promise of the Spirit, which he said would "clothe them with power from above." This promise alone was enough for them to bridge the lonely period of his absence, until the Holy Spirit did in fact come to them. With that promise, and with the Spirit which came in short order, they were able to set about doing the work of the kingdom. With that same promise and with that same Spirit which has been given to us, we are equipped to live the life we are given. With its ups and downs. With its joys and sorrows. With its gains and losses.

It is often said that Christians are "Easter people" – those who live with the hope of the Resurrection. But I find it to be equally true that we are "Ascension people" – those who live in an in-between time, having endured a loss but having not yet fully received the Spirit which will heal it. We are Ascension people, still longing for Jesus' return, still longing for all those whom we love but see no more; yet knowing all the while, unlike the infant, that what is out of sight for us is not altogether gone, not cosmically annihilated. "*If I cannot see you, are you still all right?*" Yes. "*If I cannot see you, am I still all right?*" Yes. The 'object permanence' of the departed Christ is in the promised gift of the Holy Spirit – a gift which comforts us, strengthens us, and by God's grace even makes us joyful in the face of it all.

And so we pray: *Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before.*

In the name of the Ascended Christ: Amen.