



Date: 05/16/2021

Jesus, Present

Texts: **Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53**; Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*



At the beginning of the classic film, *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy's house lands on the Wicked Witch of the East and kills her. The Wicked Witch of the East has been the ruler over Munchkin County, and the Munchkins are glad to see the end of her. She's gone at last, and so they celebrate the joyous news with a song:

 Ding Dong! The Witch is dead. Which old Witch? The Wicked Witch!
Ding Dong! The Wicked Witch is dead. 

And so the Munchkins go around singing because their tormentor is gone at last. When someone bad disappears, it's a reason for great joy. When a persecutor perishes, that's fantastic news and it's time to celebrate. That is something that I get. But what I most emphatically don't get is why the disciples returned to Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension with great joy, as the text from Luke tells us.

I mean, think about it for a minute: they thought that Jesus was dead and buried; they thought they were alone in the world, and then they saw him alive again. Now that is a reason for joy! He spent forty days with them, teaching them about the kingdom of God and giving them many convincing proofs that he was alive. Now that is a reason for joy! He showed them from the Scriptures how what had happened to him had been predicted as happening to the Messiah long ago, and how it had been fulfilled in his life, confirming God's faithfulness to God's promises. Now that is a reason for joy. But then he was taken back up into heaven so that he was no longer with them and they would never see him again. That, that is not a reason for joy!

The excitement of the resurrection is past! Hurray? The thrill of being with Jesus again, the wonder of learning from Jesus again, the happiness of seeing people healed again, is ... history? Yippee? Their new life with the living, resurrected, glorified Lord is terminated, concluded, ended, over. Hurrah? Now what on earth is fun about that? Jesus was gone. Again. And they were alone. Again! And that brought them back to Jerusalem with joy? They're celebrating Jesus' Ascension? And now we're supposed to celebrate it? Why? We never got to see him! If he hadn't gone, he'd still be here! If he hadn't ascended, he could be giving this sermon. And it would be a lot better. So why are we supposed to be celebrating? Jesus' Ascension should actually be called his departure, his leaving, his disappearance out of their sight and out of the sight of the world. Out of our sight! And this is supposed to be a good thing?

 Ding, dong, Jesus is gone, his past is past, he's gone at last, ding dong, Jesus is gone at last. 

What!? I would have preferred that he stay, thank you very much. I would have thought the apostles would have, too. In a way, I think they would have: they ask Jesus, "Lord, is it now that you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" In other words, "Okay, Lord, go for it. You're alive again, we're watching, bring it on. Show us the kingdom, restore Israel, we're ready to roll and to rule. Let's finish this thing up, and by that we mean, of course, ... you do it."

It just seems like it would have been simpler if Jesus had stayed. After all, the most convincing proof that Jesus is alive would be, well, Jesus standing right there in front of us, being, you know, alive.

Teaching us. Embracing us. Instructing us. Being once more all that he ever was to his disciples while alive the first time, but this time even better because he's been resurrected. Seeing Jesus in the Narthex, now that's a convincing proof. We could even get him one of our name tags so everyone would know it was him. That would be great. That would help our mission work immensely. A church for people who want to meet Jesus. That's an even better slogan than A church for people who don't like church.

So why are these disciples going back to Jerusalem with great joy? Am I missing something, other than Jesus being here, that is? We-ell, I might be. Whenever I get confused like this, I go back to the text. What does it say? I look at the beginning of Acts, the verses we read today, and I see something I didn't notice before: Luke says that his first volume, the Gospel According to Luke, was about all that Jesus began to do, until the day he was taken up to heaven. What's this little word "began" doing here? It sounds like Jesus might have continued doing something even after he was taken up into heaven. Like his work isn't finished yet. Is Luke's second volume, The Acts of the Apostles, going to be about what Jesus continued to do? But I thought it was about the beginning of the church. Hmm.

Maybe Jesus left us a clue. Let's check out the instructions he gave to the disciples before his Ascension. He told them to go into Jerusalem and to ... wait! To wait! Just hang around for a little bit. Well, this just gets curiously and curiously! We think of the early church as being full of dynamism, full of action and activity. And Jesus tells them to hurry up and wait. What are they waiting for? Aha, now here's the key. They are waiting for the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised to send them the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would help them carry out the mission that Jesus had set for them. It's through the Holy Spirit that Jesus is working still, in carrying out through the church the mission that he left to his disciples. The mission? What mission? The mission of being witnesses for Jesus' life and death.

Jesus told the disciples that they are to be witnesses to his suffering, death and resurrection. He told them that repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. That sounds like work! No wonder the disciples were so eager for Jesus to restore the kingdom to Israel himself, before he left. No wonder they were asking him, "Is it now, Lord, are you going to do it now, so we can watch, so we can see, oh, that would be a great thing to see."

Building God's kingdom, now that's something they want to see, but not something they necessarily want to do! Preaching the gospel story to all nations, that sounds hard. It would be better if Jesus stuck around and did it himself. Except that it's not. God wants to include us in the plan of salvation. God wants to give us the privilege of playing a part in the redemption of the world. God doesn't want us to be mere spectators. God wants us in the game. God empowers us through the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit which Jesus promised to send to us after his Ascension to be with us as his presence. In fact, before his crucifixion, Jesus had told the disciples that it was better for him to go because only if he went could he send them the Holy Spirit to help them carry out their mission, which is really his mission.

The mission Jesus gave to his disciples is the place where Jesus continues the work he began before his ascension. It is in the lives of his disciples, in our lives, that Jesus is continuing to send out apostles, starting in Jerusalem and going to the ends of the earth. It is in the changed lives of his disciples through the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus is present to carry on his work today. It is in the witness of his church to social justice, to radical inclusion, to unexpected mercy, that Jesus is

completing what he began long ago. It is through us that Jesus makes himself present to the world today, and it is through the Spirit that Jesus makes himself present to us. If Jesus had stayed, he could only be in one place at a time. Because he went, his presence through the Holy Spirit lets him be at work in all of his churches at once. It's not just one church, but every church that can be a church for people who want to meet Jesus. Because the lives of all of Jesus' disciples, powered by obedience and the Holy Spirit, ought to reflect the life of Jesus and the living Jesus. Churches ought to be a place where people who didn't ever meet Jesus get to experience what it was like to be challenged by Jesus to repent, to be embraced by Jesus in forgiveness, to be welcomed by Jesus to his family, to be accepted by Jesus as a treasured person made in God's image.

The disciples went back to Jerusalem celebrating, because Jesus was ascended to heaven and not buried again in the ground. That is, they celebrated Jesus' ascension because he was still alive, and was going to continue to be alive, and is still alive today. He was resurrected and he never died again, and that means that he really is still around. That one day, just as the men in white promised to the open-mouthed disciples, he will be visible again, and all believers - no, all the world - will be able to see him and know him. And so they celebrated. And the disciples went back to Jerusalem celebrating, because Jesus had promised them power to act in his name as his witnesses. Jesus told them that if he went away, he would send the Holy Spirit to them - the same Spirit who inspired the prophets, the same Spirit who was there at Jesus' baptism, the same Spirit who has been empowering the church from the first days. Only if Jesus ascended could the Spirit descend, so that the Spirit could be with every believer, and not just a few. And so they celebrated the continuing presence of Jesus, through the Spirit he sent.

And the disciples went back to Jerusalem celebrating because they knew something else, too: they knew that Jesus had promised to be present with them in the Lord's Supper, at the communion table. And so they celebrated.

🎵 Ding dong, the Lord is here, so divine, in bread and wine, ding, dong, the risen Lord is here! 🎵

And so for all these reasons, we celebrate Jesus' presence, too. Amen