

I do try to be a good Episcopalian, but oftentimes I feel I don't do a very good job and that the Church of England vicar in me just comes out and takes over. So for example this week, I found myself hiding the Pascal candles from my Episcopalian colleagues. Rebecca has told me many times that in the Episcopal tradition, it's customary to have the Pascal candle, that's that big candle that we light for the 40 days after Jesus's resurrection to represent his time on earth, that that's kept up until Pentecost Sunday, which is next week.

But my Church of England sensibilities can't be doomed with that. I'm used to the candle, the Pascal candle going away on Ascension Day. And I like that symbolism of the candle disappearing as we remember this time of Ascension. It reminds us that Jesus left the disciples when he went to heaven. He had to leave them so that he could return to them by his spirit at the Pentecost, which is the great festival that we'll be celebrating next week.

There was a gap. There was a time when Jesus was absent from his disciples and having the Pascal candle present and lit from Easter day to Pentecost, in my view, does away with that gap. And we need to think about gaps. They're important. Think about music. If you didn't have gaps, there would be no music. There'd just be a wall of sound. It's the silence, the gaps between the notes that make the music. Gaps are an important and inevitable part of life. Even though we'd all rather do without them, but we know in our experience that life rarely goes in a straight line from A to B to C to D and so on. There are detours and there are gaps.

We celebrate the Ascension of Jesus into heaven today, and we're minding the gap till Pentecost, next Sunday. We read in the gospel today that Jesus said to his disciples, stay here until you have been clothed with power from on high. What he didn't tell them was how long they'd have to stay there. They were left in a gap, in an in-between time. The disciples were left in the space between the absence of Jesus as he ascends into heaven and

his presence at Pentecost when he returns to them by his spirit. And I want to explore these twin themes of the presence and the absence of Jesus.

But before I do that, let me just slip in a word about the pandemic, because it occurred to me when I was preparing the sermon this week, that we will one day look back at this time, this time of pandemic as a kind of gap, as a between time. As the light starts to shine at the end of this long COVID tunnel, we can see and just begin to appreciate that there will be a post pandemic time just as there was a pre pandemic time. And the pandemic has been a time of terrible loss and absence. There's been an awful loss of life. People have lost jobs and livelihoods. And for all of us, there have been significant absences, an absence of getting together, of touch, of nights out, of graduations, of holidays. You will have your own list of what has been absent from your life in this time of pandemic.

And as things are starting to open up, as the pandemic begins to wane, we might pause to ask ourselves the question of what do we want to be present in our life now the time of great absence is coming to an end? Do we want to restore all that was absent? Have there been some absences that we haven't missed? What might we choose to do differently as life begins again? What do we want to be present in our life? We can take this opportunity to reflect on such questions before falling back into familiar patterns and routines.

I know that as a staff and as a vestry here at St. James, we're trying to ask ourselves such questions, but let me get back to the gospel reading. And first, say something about the absence of Jesus that we see there. Jesus told the disciples that it was good that he was going to leave them because he said his spirit would return to them at Pentecost. In John 16, we read this, "I tell you a truth, this to your advantage," Jesus said, "that I go away. For if I do not go away, the Spirit, the Advocate will not come to you, but if I go, I will send Him to you."

That must have been a difficult message for the disciples to hear. We all want to cling on and hold close and fast to those whom we love. It's hard to deal with the absence of loved ones. I feel I've got some sense of how the disciples must have felt as when I pray, I'm frequently aware of the absence of Jesus. I sometimes feel, perhaps I often feel, that there's no one there when I pray, that I'm speaking to myself, but that's not always the case. And how would I recognize the presence of Jesus if I didn't know what it was like to experience his absence? Indeed, how would I begin to yearn for Jesus, to search for him if I wasn't aware of his absence? To quote, the classic country and Western song, "How could I miss you if you don't go?"

So let me say a word about the presence of Jesus. In this Ascensiontide, we anticipate the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples in the feast of Pentecost when Jesus returns to be present with his disciples. Next week, we'll hear that reading from Acts where the spirit comes on the disciples in that upper room in Jerusalem as tongues of fire, and the terrified group of disciples go out onto the streets of Jerusalem and they speak with great conviction and in different tongues.

At Pentecost, the promise of Jesus that I just mentioned in John 16 is fulfilled. Remember Jesus said, "after I am gone, I'll send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate to you." And in this way, Jesus is once more present with his disciples. And it's still the case that through the Holy Spirit, God's people are blessed with the presence of Jesus and this still has a transforming effect.

I had a very vivid illustration of this a few years ago. It was during the remodeling of our house. And someone was very kind when our kitchen was taken out. Well, they were out of town and they let us stay in their beautiful house on the 16th fairway of the country club. And as many of you know, I'm working on my golf game and it was terribly frustrating to spend a week looking out onto this lovely golf course and not being able to get out and play on it. I did think about nipping out with a putter or a chipper just to get into a bit of practice,

but I didn't want to get into trouble. And more to the point, I didn't want to get the homeowner who'd so kindly lent us their house into trouble.

So each night I would sit out on the terrace with my G and T looking longingly over these lovely fairways. Then on the last day of our time there, a friend who's a member of the club pulled up in a golf cart and invited me to accompany him on a few holes. What I couldn't do on my own, I could do when I was accompanied. That's the difference that the presence of the spirit of Jesus makes. His presence gives us the confidence and equips us, enables to do what we couldn't do on our own. The presence of the spirit of Jesus is still active and still transforming his disciples.

I've got one final word about the presence of Jesus because we see in this story, that Jesus came to the disciples by his spirit while they were still confused and not knowing what was happening to them. In this passage, they're still asking Jesus as he ascends if he's going to restore the kingdom of Israel. They went back to Jerusalem, unsure, in fact wrong, about what was happening next, and then the spirit came. God doesn't wait to bless us with his presence until we've got everything sorted, till we actually understand what his plan is. The gift of God's spirit is for all believers, it's for all who ask, all who want to receive.

So next week, when you tune in, it will be Pentecost Sunday. My Episcopal colleagues may have found out where I've hidden the Pascal candle. It might reappear, but don't let that confuse you into thinking that we've moved seamlessly from Ascension to Pentecost. There's always a gap, but God is in the gap too. We might feel his absence, but his presence is always with us. Amen.