

If you were here last week, count yourself lucky because you heard a corker of a sermon from my colleague Rebecca. She always preaches well, but last week was spectacular. And she mentioned that I'd invited her preach on a resurrection theme because this Easter season I'd noticed that some of the readings set for today seemed to drift away from the resurrection. And in the Easter season, I always want to be preaching on the resurrection, so she gave a great sermon on a resurrection story, because I think it's important in the Easter season to focus on the resurrection.

I was in China the week after Easter, and we were in the Forbidden City. And we were talking with a family, and somehow the son spoke English, and he found out we were Christians, and they were Christians. He introduced his mother, who could speak no English, although she did say one word to me, "Hallelujah." I thought, "Fantastic, you can go halfway around the world, but we can still say together, 'Hallelujah,' because we share a common faith based on this wondrous act of resurrection that God by His Spirit raised Jesus from the dead, giving life and hope to all His people." And so we can say together with Christians all over the world, "Hallelujah."

This Easter season, a great season to remember and to celebrate, and so we come today to the final resurrection story. It's a story that leads in to the great feast days that come up now in quick succession, Ascension, Pentecost and Trinity, on successive weeks. This story, the resurrection, the final resurrection story where Jesus ascends into heaven, is a story I think that can be told with three Ps. The first P is parting.

Jesus ascends into heaven, and leaves his disciples behind. It's a story that always reminds me of a time when I was parted from my friend Chris, who will be surprised to know that he features in so many of my sermons. But we had a lot of adventures together when we were young. We once went to the Dolomites, very beautiful mountains in Italy, and we were on a hiking holiday. The reason we'd gone there is that the Dolomites have what's called "via ferrata", the iron ways, because in the war the army built lots of passageways and quick ways across. They built ladders and things to get across the mountain to fight battles on the other side.

We came to one of these tunnels that was built in the wall because you can suddenly get up very sheer places

you couldn't get if you were just hiking. We went up a few steps, and it was absolutely pitch black. There was no light at the end of the tunnel. The steps were decidedly rickety, or even nonexistent in some places. We thought, "Well, there's no point both of us going up there, and finding out that it doesn't go anywhere, or that ..." Anyway, so we drew lots. Thankfully, he lost, so he went up first. He didn't know there were only two short straws that were offered him. He goes up this ladder, and very soon I couldn't see him because it was pitch black.

After about five minutes, I couldn't hear him. I was just left waiting at the bottom of this black hole, and starting to fear the worst, expecting him to come tumbling down at any moment, but he didn't. It was a very long 15 minutes. But at the end of about 15 minutes, I still couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel. But I did hear his voice faintly saying, "I'm at the other side. I'm at the top. It does lead to safety," which of course transformed my experience. I was much more comfortable then following in his path.

And that is an image of the ascension that we remember today. Jesus has gone before us, and taken our humanity with him into the heights of heaven. He has blazed a trail and called us to follow him. The tunnel before us can still be dark. It's not that the lights are switched on and the tunnel becomes suddenly clear. But we know that he has a blazed a trail for us. Jesus has gone through the heavens. The one who was crucified is now glorified. As St. Paul says, "God has seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places." Jesus departed from the disciples, but he opened up for them a way to follow. His parting actually provided grounds for hope.

The second P is for promise. Jesus parted from his disciples, but he makes them a promise. He says, "And see I am sending upon you what my father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." It's actually a promise that's made at several points in the Gospel. We read this in the Gospel of John. Jesus said, "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." That's the promise we'll be celebrating next week, or the fulfillment of that promise, as we gather here to celebrate Pentecost Sunday, the day when that promise was fulfilled, when

the Holy Spirit did come upon the disciples, and was poured out upon God's church.

But I've always been intrigued by the fact that this promise wasn't fulfilled straightaway. In the Acts reading we heard, Jesus orders them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the father. "You will be baptized," it says, "with the Holy Spirit, not many days from now." Not many days? Why didn't either happen straightaway, or why did Jesus not say in five days, or in six days? I reckon that as the disciples were waiting in that upper room, they'd have had lots of conversations about, "Well, how long are we meant to be here? What did he mean not many? What does not many mean? Is the promise going to be fulfilled?" They didn't know. They were waiting there without knowing how long they were going to be there. Why did Jesus leave them hanging?

Now, of course, we don't know the answer to that question. But it seems to me to be quite characteristic of God's dealing with his people. All through the Bible and throughout Christian experience, we seem to find God from time to time withdrawing from his people. That's why it's important to me that in the church's calendar we mind the gaps. I've never been able to say that before in a sermon, and I'm pleased to be able to get it in now.

There are some significant gaps in the liturgical year, and we need to work hard at keeping them. There's one gap on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. I love that gap between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. I've been in churches that have a big vigil on Saturday night, so you go Good Friday, and then you're celebrating Easter the next day. But I like to keep that gap. I like Holy Saturday, when we remember the simple but striking fact that Jesus shared all human experience, even death, and he lay in the tomb. That's one of my favorite services, when we gather to remember Jesus lying in the tomb. We're remembering that gap between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

There's another gap here, the gap between the Day of Ascension, and then some days later, the Day of Pentecost, where Jesus has parted from his disciples, but the spirit has not yet come. Rebecca's not here, so I can do this, but I want to mark that gap by extinguishing the Paschal candle because I want to mark the gap. We light this candle to remember the time after Jesus' resurrection, when he was on the Earth. But as we

celebrate ascension, Jesus has parted from his disciples. He's not actually on the Earth. Seems entirely appropriate to me that we should have the candle unlit as we remember, and as we gather in church on a day when we remember the risen absence of Jesus, who no longer walked the Earth after his resurrection.

The psalmist writes often of the experience of God's absence. Psalm 13 begins like this. "How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" How long? That's a cry that's gone up for generations. Maybe it's the cry that went up from that room in Jerusalem when the disciples are gathering, waiting for the spirit to come. "How long? What does not many days mean?" It's much easier to bear something if you know how long it's going to last. It's the uncertainty of things that makes things unbearable.

That's something I've noticed throughout my ministry. I've noticed that people are often... find it harder to cope with illness. What's difficult is... Let me get this right. It's uncertainty. The really difficult time of an illness is going to the doctors and waiting to get the results. People who get results, even if they're not good results, because there's a certainty about the situation, we can begin to get our head around that information, and people are much better at coping. What's really difficult is not knowing, having your mind wonder, "Is this serious, is it isn't? How long have I got?" That's the really difficult time, that time of uncertainty because we don't know what to prepare for.

The disciples in this story are living in an uncertain time. They don't know how long it's going to last, this time of absence, where Jesus has parted from them and the promise is yet to be fulfilled. It's a time when they'd be acutely aware of Jesus' absence from them. They know he's returning to them because he's promised. They can have hope that he's preparing a place for them in heaven, but they still feel his absence acutely. They're living in the gap. How long? And much of us live much of our time in gaps, between times, waiting.

The questions that the disciples would've had in that upper room can often be our questions. And we, like the disciples, don't know the answer. We don't know how long things are going to take. All we know is that the followers of Jesus have always had times when they've been aware of his absence. Maybe we only

recognize the presence of God when we're familiar with his absence.

Let me, briefly, say something about the final P, presence. And I won't say too much about this because that's the theme for next week on Pentecost, another P. That's when we celebrate the coming of the spirit, God's presence with his people by the Holy Spirit. That's when the promise is fulfilled.

The only thing I'd like to mention is how much I've enjoyed Rebecca's Wednesday Formation classes. We've had this five-week series, and the broad topic has been mysticism, and we've had lots of interesting discussions about the presence and the absence of God, which seem to be key twin poles in any discussion of spirituality. In the last couple weeks, we've been concerned with engaging God's spirit in the sacraments and through scriptures. It's been very wonderful and moving, listening to people talk about how they have felt God's presence in their lives.

I've been struck with the straightforward stories, that we're not talking about visitations by hosts of angels when we say that. It's more about recognizing God's presence with us in the midst of our day-to-day lives. And they're not daily occurrences that people have been talking about. What people have been sharing might be occasional glimpses of God's presence with us. But that's often enough to sustain us, to keep hope alive.

So let's be paying attention to the God who is with us as we enter into this season of Pentecost, and as we await the fulfillment of God's promise that he would indeed return and be present to his people by his spirit. Amen.