

“On Missing Each Other”  
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“As they were looking up, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”  
(Acts 1:9)

Of all the Sunday’s in the liturgical calendar, I suspect the Sunday closest to Ascension Day (which was Thursday) is as strange as any. It stands in the gap between the crescendo of Eastertide coming to a close and the explosive sights and sounds of Pentecost. Quite honestly, Ascension Sunday is as difficult as it is strange. Why? Because it is unsettling to be reminded of the absence of the One who came to us so long ago. It has been suggested that we are all left staring at the sky, both believers and doubters alike. One moment Jesus was there with them, and the next moment he is gone. Tradition suggests that he left the earth to return to heaven, which, for the modern mind doesn’t clarify much. What is heaven exactly? And where exactly is it? Most of us hesitate to answer, which is probably a good thing, because simple answers seldom seem suitable.

The only thing left of the sermon I thought I would share today is a reference to Salvador Dali’s strange rendering of the ascension; he is known, of course, for his surreal, even bizarre paintings. About Thursday, I had a wreck on my train of thought and switched tracks, but Dali’s painting came along with me. He wrote somewhere that the inspiration for his “Ascension of Christ” came from what he called a “cosmic dream” that he had in 1950, some eight years before the painting was completed. In the dream, he saw the nucleus of an atom, which he puts in the background of the painting. At the bottom are the soles of the feet of Jesus, with his arms outstretched (forming a triangle – a way Dali portrays divinity). And at the top of the painting is the face Dali’s wife, Gala, a complicated woman, wife and mother of one daughter from an earlier marriage. I’m attracted to Dali’s rendering, because for all who follow Jesus, then and now, it is the risen Christ who remains the nucleus, the center and the structure of not only matter but of all things that matter.

Christians have been looking up for a long time now, but it is worth remembering that little by little the earliest followers of the ascended Christ started to look down and around as the two men dressed in white robes had instructed them. Those waiting started a wave of action. His followers became leaders. Those listeners became teachers, preachers and apostles. The disciples became missionaries, and the healed became healers. And it continues to this day. We mostly look down and around these days, because we have figured it out: right here is where the risen Christ is to be found. “Where two or three are gathered,” even in his absence, the Christ is present among us. We know this because if you listen to us, we have started to sound like Jesus. His hopes, dreams and prayers have become our own. We really want to do the things we remember that he did. Don’t we? On our best days, isn’t it true?

But what are we to make of Ascension Day on a Mother’s Day? A complicated day made even more complicated; preachers are still warned to trend lightly on Mother’s Day. If you are feeling left behind because your mother is no longer living, well today is a kind of memorial day, perhaps a day of sadness, maybe regret – I’ll trend carefully here. Feelings run deep, even

deeper than memories. But death is only one way of missing someone. The distance created by actual miles is another reason why we often miss one another. When Juli and I lived in a boarding school community, with families scattered around the world, we became keenly aware of the pain that comes with separation. I know that someday my Mom literally hurts in her bones as a result of living so far from her kids and grandkids. The telephone and email help and the periodic visit helps as well. But the fact remains that we miss one another whenever we live at a distance from each other.

And there is a third way we can miss one another. I'm thinking now of missing people as a result of failing to fully understand who they really are. It's true, isn't it? We can get too busy, we can become too distracted. We can miss each other by spending too little time with each other. About mid-week I found a wonderful re-wording of one of St. Paul's most memorable chapters found in one of his earliest letters. You'll recognize the phrasing and cadence as 1 Corinthians 13, but this re-write is a penetrating reminder that we can miss each other.

“If I live in a house of spotless beauty with everything in its place, but have not love, I am a housekeeper – not a homemaker. If I have time for waxing, polishing, and decorative achievements, but have not love, my children learn cleanliness – not godliness. Love leaves the dust in search of a child's laugh. Love smiles at the tiny fingerprints on a newly cleaned window. Love wipes away the tears before it wipes up the spilled milk. Love picks up the child before it picks up the toys. Love is present through the trials. Love reprimands, reproves, and is responsive. Love crawls with the baby, walks with the toddler, runs with the child, then stands aside to let the youth walk into adulthood. Love is the key that opens salvation's message to a child's heart. Now, before I became a mother, I took glory in my house of perfection. Now I glory in God's perfection of my child. As a mother, there is much I must teach my child. But the greatest is love. (Author Unknown)

Well, if you're still out there I've got one more point to make. We can miss one another by missing the awesome challenge of becoming family to one another. Recall, if you will, the hour when Jesus is dying on that dark Friday that history still remembers with great reverence. Three people are standing at the foot of the cross: Mary, the mother of Jesus; John, the disciple; and John's mother, Salome. We are told that Jesus, looking down at John, says, “Son, behold your mother,” and it is clear that he was not pointing to Salome but to Mary, the mother of Jesus. And to Mary, Jesus says, “Woman, behold your son,” not signifying himself but pointing away from himself to his friend John. From that point on, Mary was to care for John as her own son, and John was to care for Mary as his own mother, and both John and Mary were to care for each other as if caring for Christ. Little wonder that John would write so boldly about love in his gospel and letters, because on that day he embraced a whole new definition of family.

Whatever else Jesus hoped for those three, surely he hoped that they wouldn't miss each other, and I want to think the same goes for you and me. On this Mother's Day and Ascension Sunday, may we hear the words echoing down the ages: “Behold, your brothers and sisters.” “Behold, your sons, your daughters.” “Behold, your fathers.” “Behold, your mothers.” Amen.