May 10, Ascension of the Lord (Luke 24:44-53)

The church organizes its life in the wake of absence.

by Isaac S. Villegas in the April 25, 2018 issue

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“While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.” After years of living and working together, Jesus departs. He leaves his friends.

Several years ago, days before the observance of Ascension, I sat with an Amish bishop in his Indiana farmhouse as he described this season in the church calendar. Ascension, he explained, was more significant in the Amish community than Easter. I asked the bishop if they celebrated the day with a worship service, with a potluck meal, with communion? “No,” he responded. “We don’t really think of the day as a celebration at all, but more like a time of mourning.” His voice drifted away on a gust of cool air through the living room windows. “It’s a time for lament because that’s when we remember that Jesus left us behind—that’s when he left us here.” There is no feasting, only fasting.

From early on in Luke’s Gospel, we’re told that Jesus has a sense that he will be taken away from his people, dragged away from his community. He knows that his time with his friends on earth won’t last forever. He speaks of this in parables, hinting at an unbearable reality, devastation looming on the horizon. “The days will come,” Jesus warns, “when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days” (5:35). *Fasting in those days*—in these days, as the Amish bishop told me of their observance of Ascension.

“Christianity was founded upon the *loss of a body*,” writes the Jesuit historian Michel de Certeau, “an impossible mourning.” We organize our lives as communities of faith in the wake of that absence—that the earthly Jesus has ascended into heaven, as the creeds state, to be seated at the right hand of the Father. Therefore, as we announce with our communion liturgies, we “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.” The ascension of Jesus incites a longing for Christ’s return—to be drawn to his side again, reunited with his love.

Here at the end of Luke’s Gospel, before he leaves his friends, Jesus reminds them what he’s been saying all along—recalling to their minds the scriptures that have inspired his movement of abundant grace and forgiveness, reminding them of what they’ve experienced in their ragtag community. All along the way, Jesus has invited them into the bonds of friendship, a love that bursts through the limits of their society’s rules of belonging. “Truly I tell you,” Jesus promised them, “there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the

kingdom of God, who will not get back much more in this age” (18:29). They have made a life together, breaking through their culture’s family values in order to find themselves loved into a new home. Gathering around Jesus, they have discovered God’s presence in their love for one another: “The kingdom of God is among you,” he told them (17:21). Jesus knows it because he feels it, too—within them, the warmth of God’s embrace.

I wonder if his resurrection appearances were part of Jesus’ reluctant departure—as if he couldn’t quite leave for good, so he came back, again and again, extending Easter for as long as possible, returning to his friends on the road to Emmaus and then again in Jerusalem. Each time he shared meals of bread and fish, each meal a last chance to linger in the kingdom of God and postpone his final ascension.I wonder if Jesus’ departure is one more trial for him, another misery of his long ordeal. I wonder if it is part of the agony begun on the Mount of Olives when he prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours” (22:42)—as if everything from crucifixion to ascension was in that cup, Jesus praying to the Father for another way, an alternate route. Praying for anything that would keep him on earth with his beloved community, the kingdom of God in the flesh, a new creation, friendships alive with divine love and grace, a people readied for the work of mercy and justice and prepared for the struggle for peace.

Perhaps Jesus—“ascended into heaven,” “seated at the right hand of the Father”—wants now what he had then with his friends: earthly love, interdependent care, mutual reliance, the grace made flesh in communal human life, precious because fragile. With the disciples there is ecstasy and, as Luke says, “great joy.” Luke’s Gospel ends with the open-ended act of worship, ecstatic delight as an invitation for Christ’s return. The disciples’ embrace forever reaches toward him, their community awaiting the consummation of their desire for him and his desire for them. Worship allures the homecoming of Jesus.

Church is a form of waiting, of beckoning. We are founded upon the loss of a body, as Certeau put it—a loss at our core that prods us to keep ourselves open, to stay in a posture of reception, always prepared for an arrival. The ascension of Jesus renders our communion a summons, always an invitation, a perpetual expectation of a reunion with God’s beloved. The church lives as an anticipation of shared joy with the next visitor, who may be Christ.