

We've been going through a sermon series called "There and Back Again" which focuses on Jesus' last words to His disciples. We have been discussing how Jesus went "There and Back Again" He went from our Heavenly Father to the Earth back to our Heavenly Father. By considering the road He trod, we consider our own spiritual journeys and how we can hope to also make it heaven.

We have been going through four provisions that the Holy Spirit provides us that help us on our "There and Back Again" journey. First, we discussed perspective. The Holy Spirit gives us the Gospel which gives us hope even in the midst of tribulation. Second, we discussed prayer. Prayer is a lifeline that lets us share our concerns with God and lets us know that He is already providing for our needs.

Our third P which we will unpack today is presence. After the Ascension, Jesus is more present than He was during His earthly ministry. To this you might say: 1. (oops!) Present? You got to be kidding me, pastor! Luke himself records, **"While [Jesus] blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven."** It says "parted" right there, pastor, stop making the Bible do somersaults!

Pastor, if both you and Jesus are present, who would choose to have a coffee with Jesus over having a coffee with you! Having a coffee with Jesus would just be me sitting at a table alone talking to myself like a crazy person. There's no way around it, Jesus really isn't more present now than He was before His Ascension, is He?

In fact, 2. (ugh!) Wouldn't it be so much better if Jesus never left? How different would our world be if instead of ascending to Heaven He just stayed here and hung out in Jerusalem? Resurrected from the dead with a glorified body, He wouldn't grow old or decay. He would be just as fresh and limber today as He was centuries ago.

If Jesus did that, that would really silence all the doubters, wouldn't it? You wouldn't have to wonder if Jesus rose from the dead. You could take a plane to Israel and ask Him yourself. You need a connection to the Divine? Just dial this number and have a phone conversation with Jesus. International calling fees may apply. Need a miracle? You know where to visit and you know who to call. Talk about presence! Wouldn't that be nice?

Perhaps the reality isn't so cut and dried. If seeing Jesus in the flesh was enough to make you believe in Him, then wouldn't the entire nation of Israel follow Him and call Him Lord and Savior during His earthly ministry? We know that's not the case. The chief priests, the elders, and many others rejected Jesus. The fact Jesus rose from the dead in the first place is testament to the fact that He died. How did He die? People knowingly and willingly rejected, arrested, tortured, and killed the Son of God.

We wouldn't fare much better in this crazy generation in which we live. If Jesus was just sitting in Jerusalem, would people really believe He rose from the dead? Humans have all sorts of clever and not so clever ways to hide from the truth. Rumors would start that He wasn't from the 1st century, but it was a long chain of lookalikes who swapped out throughout the generations. People would say miracles were just hoaxes or parlor tricks. People can choose not to believe what's right in front of their very noses.

Would they try to kill Him again? After generations of people throwing rocks, slashing swords, firing machine guns, and maybe even setting off nukes, perhaps people would try to recruit Him as the indestructible war machine. The same types of people who wanted Him for a free lunch will want Him to do their bidding.

And presence? Talk about a hot commodity. If Jesus was popular when the 5,000 came to Him, think about what would happen when word gets out. It will be easier to get an audience with the President of the United States. Millions would flock from around the globe to see Him, and we'd just be left watching from the cheap seats. That's not much presence, is it? Okay Pastor, maybe I'll hear you out on this whole presence thing.

Ascension teaches us 3. (Aha!) Jesus never left; He is more present than ever before. Indeed, we read in Ephesians 4:10 of Jesus “**He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.**”)” Jesus Christ ascended far above all the heavens that He might fill all things. AFTER HIS ASCENSION, JESUS IS MORE PRESENT THAN HE WAS BEFORE, ALTHOUGH IN A HIDDEN WAY.

Martin Luther says this about the Ascension: “Moreover, we believe that Christ, according to his human nature, is put over all enemies [Eph. 1:22] and fills all things, as Paul says in Eph. 4[:10]. Not only according to his divine nature, but also according to his human nature, he is a lord of all things, has all things in his hand, and is present everywhere. ... Christ is around us and in us in all places. ... It means rather that he is above all creatures and in all and beyond all creatures. That he was taken up bodily, however, occurred as a sign of this. Therefore, he now has all things before his eyes, more than I have you before my eyes, and he is closer to us than any creature is to another.”

You don't need to take a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He's not only there during pastoral office hours. Jesus Christ is present in all places as full God and full human so that He can hear your prayers, so that He can comfort you with His presence. So that you can know you're never alone.

4. (Whee!) The eyes of faith see Jesus present in the Word and Sacrament. Luther continues: “Although he is present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for he certainly is there, yet he does not

wish that I seek him there apart from the Word, and cast myself into the fire or the water, or hang myself on the rope. He is present everywhere, but he does not wish that you grope for him everywhere. Grope rather where the Word is, and there you will lay hold of him in the right way.”

Although since His Ascension, Jesus is present everywhere. He is present in the fishing boat. He’s present in the pillow when you can’t get out of bed. He’s present on the baseball diamond. However, He calls us to seek Him in His Word and in His Sacrament specifically. So we gladly gather at Church—even on a Thursday night—to hear God’s Word and partake of Christ’s body and blood because here is where Jesus truly is.

And so we gladly are like the more noble Bereans who “...**received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.**” Because of the Ascension, Christ is present as a human even in His Word. You *can* have coffee with Jesus tomorrow morning. Go to a local coffeeshop, buy a latte and open up the Scriptures and pray. As you meditate on today’s *Portals of Prayer* you know Christ gifts you with His presence as you read, mark, and inwardly digest His Word.

And tonight, we encounter Jesus. It may not be spectacular, but it is miraculous, that through normal bread and wine He comes to us with His very body and blood. You may have not walked with Jesus like the disciples did, but *you* walk up to Jesus every time you come to communion.

And it is through the eyes of faith that we see Jesus present in the Word and Sacrament, but guess what? The disciples and those who followed Jesus during His earthly ministry also needed the eyes of faith to see that He was more than a carpenter.

That’s why it’s a gift of the Holy Spirit. For us to get “there and back again” just as Jesus did, we need the gift of Jesus’ presence that was granted after His exaltation at His Ascension.

5. (Yeah!) The eyes of faith see Jesus present even in the dumps. In the same paragraph Luther remarks, “If Christ were not with me in dungeon, torture, and death, where would I be?” And so Christ’s Ascension exalts Him to fill all in all, although in a hidden way. It is through His Ascension alone that He can promise in Matthew 28 “...**behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**” Whether the Church rises or falls, we can know that we are given the provision of the presence of Christ, even after His Ascension.

If Jesus wanted to be present to the millions of souls that need His grace, it would look a lot like what He did. He parted from the sight of the disciples—parting from their sight, but not parting from their presence. As sure as Christ walked with the disciples to the Road to Emmaus, we can be confident that Jesus walks with us on our faith journey, always gracing us with His presence.