
Sweet Sorrow: Finding Consolation in the Kitchen on Ascension Day

A sermon by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
The Seventh Sunday of Easter – The Sunday after the Ascension

"Parting is such sweet sorrow," posits the Bard of Avon. And yet, I have found little sweetness in saying goodbye. There are exceptions, of course; who among us doesn't enjoy waving farewell to departing houseguests! But, as a rule, saying goodbye leaves a *bitter* taste behind, *not* one of sweetness. Over the course of a life together, we acclimate to one another - we know and become known, woven into each other's relational ecosystems. That is, until the great goodbye comes and disrupts our comfortable equilibrium, forcing us to adjust to the destabilizing vacuum called absence.

Which is why our Gospel reading makes me pause. The disciples do something... out of character. Remember, just 42 days ago their leader, teacher, and dear friend was executed by the state and laid in a tomb. Just 40 days ago, they got news from Mary Magdalene that Jesus had risen from the dead! Imagine how the disciples felt as hope and fear violently oscillated within them. They knew the devastation of a crucified messiah and the exhilaration of a risen king!

Imagine the dreams they dreamed those 40 days after Easter...

For years, they had toiled for the coming of the Kingdom; now it was bursting in through locked doors and filling up empty nets. No worldly power, not Rome, not sin, not death, could stop them now. But then Luke tells us that while Jesus was blessing the disciples, "he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." Divine presence once again gives way to profound absence. And what do the disciples do? "They worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy..." Not sweet sorrow, but joy! Which leaves me wondering, what did the disciples know about final farewells that I don't? What did they see on that hill that allowed them to live in Jesus' absence joyfully?

It's possible they saw a scene like what the Old Masters painted: Jesus borne up on the wings of angels, vanishing into the heavens, stigmata-ed feet poking out beneath the clouds. Luke just gives us the bare bones: a blessing, a lifting, a disappearance. Whatever they witnessed, the disciples somehow understood that what occurred was not the end of the relationship, but only the beginning. They saw that by returning to the Father, Jesus took with him his very humanity, our humanity, and enthroned it at God's right hand, our life intermingled with the divine life forever.

Which is all well and good for the theology books, but I still find myself missing people who are no longer here. I miss my maternal grandfather, among others. I never really got to know him; he died when I was 5. Beyond traces of him in my earliest memories, his laugh, his smile, I only know him as an amalgamation of stories, photographs, and relics. One photograph stands out: it is a portrait of him at the stove, and from his beaming smile you can tell it's his happy place. He has on an apron over his rugby shirt and a glass of red wine in his hand. He is no doubt tinkering with a recipe of his own device, perhaps imitating some exotic dish picked up on a business trip.

It is this image of Pop Pop that comes to mind when I find myself at my stove, my happy place, apron on and glass in hand. Sometimes when I cook I am overwhelmed by the oppressive weight of Pop Pop's absence. As I'm sauteing onions, I tell God that I am sad. I tell God that I am grieving what could have been. I pray for Pop Pop, that he is happy, that the food in heaven is good. I give thanks for Pop Pop, for his love for his family and

for me. By the time I'm deglazing the pan, the Holy Spirit has so enveloped me in its presence, so surrounded me with the communion of saints, that I can feel him with me. Not in an abstract, "thinking of you, Pop Pop," kind of way. A visceral, intimate presence, as if he is hugging my heart, and we are together, if just for a breath. At that moment, we are closer than if he were standing next to me.

I'm curious about the myriad ways you've encountered the Holy Spirit. Many of our Spirit stories begin with some manifestation of absence: spiritual dryness or disorientation or desolation. Then, through the subtle movements of the Spirit, our attention is guided to God. A longing arises, too deep for words, and becomes, whether we know it or not, a prayer. Now caught up in the communion of conversation, absence gives way to presence, joyful presence.

That seems to be the story of the disciples too. Their experience of the ascension and their reaction to Jesus' absence, their insistence on worship and prayer, their trust in Jesus' promise of a coming comforter and helper, their ability to walk forward joyfully, all suggest the movement of the Holy Spirit, unwilling to wait for Pentecost. It is the Holy Spirit who enlivens our prayers, who joins the living to the dead. who closes the chasm between this world and the next. It is the Spirit who calls us to embody Christ, to be Christ's body in the world.

Perhaps Christ's ascension is a sweet sorrow, after all. His absence makes possible a spiritual intimacy with God and neighbor more profound than physical proximity ever could. Goodbye, it turns out, is never the last word.

A Haiku for the Ascension

He bids us farewell
with blessing. I receive it
later in a breath.