

How did you feel when it was time to pack away your Christmas tree, lights, ornaments and decorations? Wouldn't it have been nice to keep Christmas alive for a few more weeks? Now that they have been hidden for the past five months, have you even thought about Christmas? Out of sight, out of mind! Right?

It is always amazing when we think about all of the pageant and drama and passion and money that we spend to gear up for Christmas ... and so quickly it disappears. And it is interesting how dependent we are on props and visual aids to remember what is important in our lives. When we don't have visual reminders, it is easy to ignore or forget what might be important in our lives. That is why photographs and Facebook posts, and diaries, and conversations with people we care about are so important.

In many ways, that is what the disciples went through as they witnessed the Ascension, when Jesus withdrew his physical presence from earth. It was like putting Christmas decorations away. Instantly their world had changed and they didn't know what would happen next. They were in a time of transition, just as we are when Christmas trees are gone and we are back to our normal lives without carols and gifts and mangers.

Luke began his Gospel with angels opening up the heavens and coming down to earth. At that moment, heaven came down to earth as a baby in a manger. Angels sang, shepherds ran, while Mary and Joseph sat quietly with a miracle baby and the beginning of their new family (and ours!) What powerful images Luke shares that help us to remember why this was such an important moment in time.

Luke ends his Gospel with the fully grown and risen Jesus, being swallowed back into heaven. And then he was out of sight, and things were just as they were before it all started in Bethlehem. No manger, no shepherds, no baby Jesus. Rather than shepherds, now it was the disciples turn to be drawn to this drama. Yet, there was nothing more to see, and they simply stood staring at the sky, not knowing what to say or feel, as their Jesus was visible no more. Already they were realizing how much they would miss the daily presence of the visible Jesus. It was as if they were paralyzed and didn't have a clue what to do next.

They were caught off guard. They had felt the same way when Jesus died, thinking that all was lost and they would never see Jesus again. Then he had returned to life and their joy was restored and they were back into their daily classroom sessions with Jesus. And then, just as suddenly he was taken away again. What could they do but stand with mouths wide open, looking hopefully for a last glimpse, a reminder, or maybe a return? Now what? What would they do? What purpose did they have? Now what?

The Ascension is a forgotten festival of the Church. It is on the calendar, 40 days after Easter, year after year after year. But we aren't that excited about a day with such a confusing tone. First there is the inability to understand what happened. Did He just slowly float into the clouds? Did he just disappear? And secondly, what is there to say except that he was no longer there. Nothing to see. Nothing to do. That's it!

Think about the pain of his disciples. The fears. The confusion. Now what? All of us have experienced similar moments with the death of people we love, or when a best friend moves far away and we never see them again. We gradually forget the sound of a voice. Over time even a mental image of their appearance, or how they walked, or what they liked to eat slowly fades away. And finally, there are longer and longer periods of time when we don't even think about them as much as we should.

Out of sight ... out of mind. Right?

When life is full of pain it is hard to see God at work. When we struggle with the reality of wars, disease, anger, envy and greed we don't feel the presence of Jesus. When we face death it is hard to remember the joy of a Christmas baby. So often we are like those disciples at the moment of Jesus' Ascension as we stand with mouths wide open and hearts full of anxiety or fear, wondering how we could bring back what we miss so much. We are no different than the disciples, as we wish we could see God in the flesh or that we knew what to do next. When life is perfect we often don't even think of God, but when there is sickness, pain, dementia, job loss, divorce, bad grades, a car wreck, or any thousand other intrusions into life we wonder "where did God go?"

In Acts, Luke writes that while the disciples were staring blankly at the sky, two men dressed in white said, "He will return in the same way." Think about that!!! He will come back and it will be almost like Christmas all over again! The heavens will open angels will sing and God will visibly be present again in the form of Jesus! We would love to know what it looked like for Jesus to disappear back into the future, but more important is to know what that means and why it happened.

There is no way that shepherds who showed up at the manger with Mary and baby Jesus could fully comprehend what they observed, but Luke tells us that when they left the manger they went and told everyone what they had seen and heard! They were the first witnesses, the first disciples, the first missionaries ... and they did it without training.

And Luke says the disciples were given the same mission. Before Jesus withdrew his visible presence from that time and place he told his disciples "You now will be my witnesses!" They would have the same task as the shepherds at Christmas, to go and tell what they had seen and heard. Now that Jesus would no longer be visibly present, his disciples would become the visual image and presence of his servant love.

That might not sound like what they really wanted, but as they learned to wash feet and tell the stories Jesus told, he was alive in their hearts and lives. As they opened their hearts in prayer and shared the meal of communion when they gathered, they felt his presence and were gifted with his peace. It is in remembering that we remember. And like shepherds who ran from the manger, his disciples changed the world because they carried the image of Jesus in their hearts and lives and made sure others knew! He truly is the gift that keeps on giving and the Christmas joy that never ends.

While my dad was in the last years of his life, he wasn't the same. He didn't talk. He couldn't remember. Conversations were impossible. But every time I walked into his room to visit he looked up and said "Hi Tim." He remembered. He remembered me. And that is what I remember and what I will always see. Even though I will never see my Dad on this earth again, I will never forget. It isn't like Christmas, but the loving presence of my Dad will always be, and I will have no trouble sharing memories and the gift of his life with kids and grandkids and anyone else who might be touched by his life.

These are all the things I think about as I ponder the message of this day of Ascension. In many ways it was no different than Easter when disciples looked into an empty tomb and were told "why would you seek life in the place of death?" After his Ascension they were told, why are you gazing at where he "was" ... celebrate where he is now! In your hearts. In your memory! In your living. In your servant love. Go! Tell! Love!

Christmas is fun. It is exciting. But we don't have the same excitement about Jesus' Ascension. But why not? This might be one of the most exciting stories of all! It affirms that Jesus had

completed his earthly mission. He finished what he came in human form to do. That phase of the salvation story was ended, and a new chapter is ready to unfold. Into our hands he places his life, death, and resurrection and given us the good news that we are OK. We are loved. We will be with God forever. And we have the mission now of sharing what he has done for us! There is nothing more for God to do

It is important to understand Jesus didn't tell his disciples to sit on a mountain, stare at the skies, and wait for him to come back. Instead he told his disciples to do NOW for others what he had done for them. They would be his hands and feet, his voice and his image. They would be the body of Christ and through them others would know of his love. And that has become our mission as well. The only presents to open today are your lives of love. You have been filled with the gifts of grace, mercy, and peace for a reason, and you celebrate those gifts as you share them in love.

It might be interesting to wonder about how Jesus will come back in glory on the last day, but more important is to celebrate that he has never really left. Oh, his visible presence was taken away, but only so that he could be physically present in every time and place, in every prayer and moment of worship, in communion, in Baptism and in our daily gifts of servant love. Christmas hasn't been taken away, it simply has taken on a new shape and a new joy ... for the whole world. Out of sight, yes! But never out of mind, and always in our hearts. Joy to the world indeed. This begins each of our new and purpose- filled special days! - tws