

"Elvis has left the building." We all know what that means: the show's over; the fat lady has sung; hit the road Jack; hasta la vista, baby; and don't forget to tip your servers.

"Elvis has left the building." There'll be no more encores, kids. He's gone. So go back to your normal lives. Nothing more to see here. The King is gone.

But what about the King of Kings? Is Jesus gone?

This is the Sunday after Ascension Day. Jesus ascends into heaven. Is the Ascension another way of saying, "Jesus has left the building?"

I bet the disciples thought so. Luke tells us in the first chapter of Acts that Jesus took his disciples out to the Mount of Olives. There he did some final teaching. And then, Luke says, "(Jesus) was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." He's there one minute. And the next he is being carried away. Now you see him. Now you don't.

Oh, sure. They all knew that Jesus had been appearing and disappearing at will for the 40 days after his resurrection. But this was more than a disappearance.

Jesus was lifted up. He was carried away. Do you know what that would mean to the disciples? It would mean one thing. Permanence. Oh sure, Jesus would come back sometime, some day. But it wouldn't be any time soon.

Because the disciples knew the story of Elijah. Every good Jewish boy and girl knew that story. 800 years earlier, Elijah had been carried up into heaven in a whirlwind. And 800 years later, everyone was still hoping Elijah would return. But they were still waiting, and waiting, and waiting.

Jesus also was lifted up and carried away. For the disciples it would have meant, 'The show's over. You're on your own. You've been abandoned. Jesus has left the building. At least for a while. Maybe for centuries.'

But they weren't abandoned. They may have felt abandoned. But they weren't really abandoned.

True, Jesus was no longer visibly present. After the Ascension, the disciples could no longer see Jesus with their eyes, or touch him with their hands. But invisibility does not equate with absence.

In fact, Jesus was actually more present after the Ascension. 10 days after the Ascension, he sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Through the Holy Spirit, the disciples were able to be in touch with God in a more intimate way. Even more intimate than when they were running around Galilee with Jesus. They couldn't see God physically in a human body anymore. But God was still there with them. And not just with them, but in them.

And, it was almost necessary that it happen that way. Think about it. If Jesus had hung around preaching and teaching in the usual way, then there would have been nothing for the disciples to do. Jesus stepped out of the way so that his disciples could set about engaging in the work of proclaiming the kingdom. The disciples could have never done that if Jesus were still present in the same way.

Jesus has left the building? Yes, in one sense. And yet, in a deeper sense, Jesus was still there, in an even deeper way than he had been before. The disciples may have felt abandoned. But they weren't really abandoned.

And that's so important for us. I don't know about you. But there are times when it seems like God is distant, or even absent. There are times in my life when I struggle and I wish God would step in and fix everything, but he doesn't.

It's at those kinds of times when it's tempting to say, "Either God isn't there. Or God doesn't care."

At those kinds of times it's especially important to remember the Good News. God is there. And God does care. We may not always be able to sense his presence. But invisible does not equal absent.

I know during this time of pandemic and social distancing, it's very tempting to ask God, "Why?" "Why are you allowing this to happen?"

Or you may be asking God, "Where?" "Where are you in the midst of all of this pain and suffering?"

Or you may be asking, "When?" "When will this end? How long, will this continue?"

Those are all good questions. And they all appear in various forms throughout scripture. They appear a lot in the Psalms. I love the Psalms. The Psalms are one of the greatest spiritual resources in scripture. The Psalms contain every possible human emotion from exultation and exhilaration to dejection and depression.

And the Psalms are great at asking questions like "Why & Where & When?" Listen to the statements in these Psalms.

Psalm 10:

"Why do you stand so far off, O Lord, and hide yourself in time of trouble?

"(The wicked) say in their heart, 'God has forgotten; he hides his face; he will never notice.'"¹

Psalm 22:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? and are so far from my cry and from the words of my distress?"

¹ Ps 10:1, 11

"O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer; by night as well, but I find no rest."²

Psalm 42:

"My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God; when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?"

"My tears have been my food day and night, while all day long they say to me, 'Where now is your God?'"

"Why (has God) forgotten me? and why do I go so heavily while the enemy oppresses me?"³

Psalm 74:

"O God, why have you utterly cast us off?"

"How long, O God, will the adversary scoff?"

"Why do you hold back your hand?"⁴

The Psalms convey these wonderful human emotions, these poignant human questions. Why is this happening? When will it end? Where is God when we need him?

It's tempting to say, "Either God isn't there. Or God doesn't care."

Yet at those kinds of times it's especially important to remember that God is there. And God does care. We may not always be able to sense his presence. But invisible does not equal absent.

There's a wonderful scene in the movie *Ray*, the 2004 biography of the singer, Ray Charles. During the movie, Ray Charles flashes back again and again to memories from his childhood. Ray grew up as the poor son of a single mother in the rural south during the depression.

And if that isn't difficult enough, during his childhood, Ray begins to go blind. As his blindness increases, Ray's mother tries to help him to learn how live without his sight.

She says, "Okay, I'll show you how to do something once. I'll help you if you mess up twice. But the third time you're on your own, cause that's the way it is in the world." And she adds, "Ain't nobody gonna have no pity on you just cause you goin' blind."

Later on, there's a wonderful scene. Ray trips and falls on a rug in their poor one room house. He cries and screams for his mother: "Mama! Help! Mama, help, please! I need you!"

His mother is standing in the kitchen area. She can see and hear her son quite clearly. And yet, she doesn't intervene. Fighting back tears, she stands still and keeps quiet and watches

² Ps 22:1-2

³ Ps 42:2-3, 9

⁴ Ps 74:1, 9, 10

what Ray will do. You can see the agony in her face. She wants desperately to step in and help her son. But she also knows that he has to learn to do things for himself.

Eventually Ray picks himself up. And then, in an incredible sequence, he begins to navigate around the house based on the sound of the boiling kettle on the stove, the heat from the fireplace, the sounds of nature coming in through the windows. Eventually, he even hears a cricket, and he picks up the cricket by sound alone. He holds the cricket up to his ear and listens to it chirp. And then he says, "I hear you too Mama. You're right there."

And with that she walks over to him and hugs him and says, "Yes I am."

Then he asks, "Why are you cryin' Mama?"

And she says, "Because I'm happy."

Ray's mother is a wonderful picture of God's love for us. One moment, the best thing for her to do is watch and not intervene. Another moment, the best things for her to do is to embrace. But always, she loves her child.

The same goes for us. Sometimes we sense God's presence. Sometimes we feel God's embrace. Sometimes we feel warm and wonderful, basking in God's love.

But sometimes we sense God's absence. Sometimes we cry out, wondering where God is. Sometimes we feel like we're on our own, like we're abandoned.

But always, whether we feel it or not, God is there. And God does care. Don't make the mistake of confusing the absence of sensing God with the absence of God himself. They're not the same thing. Yes, Jesus has ascended into heaven.

But, as we heard in our Gospel lesson last week, Jesus has promised us,
"I will not leave you orphaned..."⁵

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you (the Holy Spirit) ..." ⁶

"(And) you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you."⁷

Elvis may have left the building. And Jesus may have ascended to his Father's right hand. But Jesus is still present with us. God is still with us. And he promises to be with us, always.

We may not always sense him. But he is there. And he does care.

⁵ Jn 14:18

⁶ Jn 14:16

⁷ Jn 14:20