

*Dearly beloved
 We are gathered here today
 To get through this thing called "life"
 Electric word, life
 It means forever and that's a mighty long time
 But I'm here to tell you—there's something else
 The afterworld
 A world of never-ending happiness
 You can always see the sun, day or night
 So when you call up that shrink in Beverly Hills
 You know the one,
 Dr. Everything'll-Be-Alright
 Instead of asking him how much of your time is left
 Ask him how much of your mind, babe
 'Cause in this life, things are much harder than in the afterworld
 In this life, you're on your own
 And if de-elevator tries to bring you down, go crazy
 Punch a higher floor*

Some of you will recognize those words as the introduction to the classic song by the late-great Prince, the song "Let's Go Crazy." It was the second of two #1 mega-hits he had in 1984 that took Prince from obscurity to super-stardom. Those words were also the opening words in the popular movie, *Purple Rain*.

But is Prince correct in these lyrics?

There's actually much that I would agree with. I still think it's amazing that a #1 Billboard Pop hit would talk about the afterworld:

*A world of never-ending happiness
 You can always see the sun, day or night*

And I would agree that
in this life, things are much harder than in the afterworld

But then Prince loses me. Because he adds the words,
In this life, you're on your own
 Is that so? Are we on our own?

That's a theme and a question every year on this Sunday. The 7th Sunday of Easter is always the Sunday between Ascension Day and Pentecost. Ascension Day, the 40th day of Easter was this past Thursday.

And today on the Sunday after Ascension Day, we heard a lesson from the first chapter of Acts telling of Jesus' Ascension into heaven.

Jesus is taken into heaven, and leaves his disciples behind in this world.

Pentecost is only 10 days after the Ascension. But the disciples don't know what's coming. I suspect that at that point they would have agreed with Prince:

In this life, you're on your own

I suspect that the followers of Jesus were wondering if they had been truly left on their own. I bet they were wondering if Jesus, like Elvis, had "left the building," leaving them behind. I bet they felt somewhat abandoned at this point.

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 exalted and 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.

In this life, you're on your own

But not really. 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, Jesus 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.

But it's a natural human tendency to question, to ask if we're really on our own at times.

Even our Collect for Day for this 7th Sunday of Easter every year has this jumble of emotions. It says,

"O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before..."¹

'God, you've taken Jesus back to yourself. Don't leave us comfortless. Don't leave us feeling abandoned. Don't let us think we're on our own.'

Rather,
"Send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before."

Or in Prince's words,
*And if de-elevator tries to bring you down, go crazy
Punch a higher floor*

"De-elevator."

This is probably a thinly veiled reference to the devil, the evil one.

*And if de-elevator tries to bring you down, go crazy
Punch a higher floor*

If the evil one tries to bring you down, punch a higher floor. Ask God to exalt you to that place where Jesus has gone before.

Yes, Jesus left his earthly existence behind. But, more wonderfully, Jesus has taken our human nature with him into heaven to be a part of God's existence. Jesus is no longer physically present on earth. Jesus' presence is elsewhere. He now reigns in glory.

¹ BCP p226

Thus it may seem like you're on your own.

Yes, in a way Jesus is somewhere else. Jesus is no longer tied and bound to a human body. Jesus no longer runs around on this planet making appearances in his resurrected body. He doesn't fly from continent to continent in a private jet, preaching in different stadiums. He's not out there signing autographs, or shaking hands.

Instead, Jesus is somewhere else. He has a much grander and much more glorious existence. That's what the Creeds are telling us. "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father."

In other words, Jesus has a new type of existence. He is not restricted to space and time as we finite human creatures are. Instead he is Lord of all times and all places. His activity is no longer restricted to 1st century Israel. He is instead alive and active everywhere, even in Lubbock, Texas, even in the 21st century.

He has carried our humanity back to God, so that one day, we too can be with God.

That was our prayer earlier:

"Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before..."

One day we are promised a place in the afterworld, a place with Jesus.

And yes, it seems at time that
in this life, things are much harder than in the afterworld

But

In this life, you're NOT on your own

Jesus is no longer on earth in his resurrected body. But we're not on our own because we have been knit together into Christ's body by God's Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God's intimate continuing presence with us as individuals, and us as a group.

Jesus has left behind a new body. Jesus is thus still here in a physical sense, with a new body, a body of which you and I are part.

In this life, you're NOT on your own

The book of Ephesians tells us that Jesus' new body is the church, of which he is the head. In a very real sense, Jesus is here, in us, his church. We are his arms and legs in the world. We are his hands to do his work.

It is WE. Jesus he left us not as individuals, but as a group, as a community of faith, as his body. We're not on our own because we have each other.

That's the last thing Jesus tells his disciples in Acts: "Y'all are my witnesses." You plural. You're the ones who are to carry on my message. You are the ones to do my work in the world. I'll be with you. I'll send the Holy Spirit to empower you. But the work is yours.

Jesus has ascended into heaven. One day, Jesus will return in glory. In the meantime, in the in-between time, he has left us here to do his work.

Jesus has gone up on high. He has vanquished death. He has conquered the powers of hell. He sits at the right hand of God. And he calls us to be his body. He calls us to do his work.

*And if de-elevator tries to bring you down, go crazy
Punch a higher floor*

Lord, "Send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before."