

Absent, but Still With

Ascension of our Lord

May 17, 2026

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There are two kinds of being absent. First is the absence that says, 'I don't care.' This is the one of disengagement, indifference, and dismissal. While there are times when this may be the best we can do in a challenging situation or with something beyond our control, it is generally hurtful to ourselves and others. It leaves us feeling empty and others feeling unappreciated. Second is the absence that says, 'even if I am not present, I still care.' This is the one that acknowledges limitations, empowers others to take the lead, and seeks a new kind of presence. While it may initially feel just like the first kind of absence, this second kind of absence is much different.

Today, we celebrate the feast of the Ascension of our Lord. As our First Reading from the Acts of the Apostles said, 40 days after the Resurrection, the Risen Lord was taken up in a cloud out of their sight into heaven. He would be absent moving forward. In the shock and sadness of him leaving, we are left with the image of his followers staring up intently at the sky. Was this to be the end of God's involvement with humanity? Was divine revelation now finished? We get the answer in today's Gospel. In our Gospel, the Risen Lord said to his followers, "and behold, I am with you always,

until the end of the age.” His absence was not going to be the one of ‘I don’t care.’ It was the one of ‘even when I am not present, I still care.’

In all our relationships, the prepositions we use in explaining them are very insightful. For many of us, we like to speak about our relationships using the prepositions ‘for’ and ‘to.’ We talk about what we can do ‘for’ other or ‘to’ others. In the Church, we speak about what Jesus did ‘for’ or ‘to’ us. Both prepositions, however, can be enabling instead of empowering. In the Gospel, Jesus gave us the best preposition when he said, “and behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” ‘With’ is a much better preposition because whereas ‘for’ and ‘to’ imply the need for a physical or immediate presence, ‘with’ can co-exist with absence. The Risen Lord can still be ‘with’ us even after the Ascension. Loved ones can still be ‘with’ us even when they are not physically here to do anything ‘for’ or ‘to’ us. For those who have lost a loved one in death, you know the power of the preposition ‘with.’ They are still with us.

The Ascension teaches us that we can be absent and ‘with’ at the same time.

In what ways do I look up at the sky lamenting or complaining about Jesus’ absence from this world, all the while forgetting that the Risen Lord is still with us? How can I be more attentive to the

Spirit of the Risen Christ still active in our world as we discern the way forward?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that any absence in our lives is not the kind that doesn't care, but the kind that cares even more. May we move beyond doing things 'to' or 'for' others. Like the Risen Christ, may we learn to do things 'with' others, even if that means stepping back and waiting on the coming of the Holy Spirit.