

*holy absence*  
a sermon preached on the  
*seventh sunday of easter*  
28 May 2017  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by dr muriel porter*

The lections: Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68: 1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 5; John 17:1-11

Here's a thought for the seventh Sunday of Easter: How much easier would it have been for Mary Magdalene and the other women if, when they went to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning, they had found it intact. If they had been able to go inside and tenderly minister to Jesus' broken, lifeless body with the unguents they had brought with them for that last ministry of love.

Yes, they would still have been heartbroken, as they had been as they watched his agonizing death on the cross two days earlier. But at least they would have known what they were dealing with. They would have had certainty.

Certainty. It is what we all crave. We want to know what we are dealing with, even if it is terrible beyond description. We want to be certain that we can control our present situation, and our future. We humans hate living in a vacuum, in a time of 'not knowing'. We want to hold on to our certainties. They make us feel secure.

But when the women came to the tomb, there was no certainty at all. Their whole world was thrown upside down. Mark's Gospel tells us they fled from the tomb in terror and amazement: 'They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid'.<sup>1</sup> In John's Gospel, when Mary Magdalene came face to face with the Risen Christ in the garden, she longed to throw her arms around him, to hold onto him. His response – 'do not cling to me'<sup>2</sup> – must have been very unsettling for her. She wanted the certainty of the old life with him, to turn back the clock to the time before the terrible events of the last few days. But that could not be, because his resurrection required a quite different relationship.

Perhaps over the following weeks she and the other disciples became used to the resurrected Jesus appearing among them at different times and in different places. Perhaps they thought that this was the new certainty, and they came to bank on it. Until the Ascension – the feast we have just celebrated this past week.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 16:8

<sup>2</sup> John 20: 17

Let's not be distracted by the seemingly concrete details of how Jesus' return to the Father happened. The Gospels, and the Book of Acts from which we have heard this morning, offer varying accounts. Today we have heard of Jesus being lifted up out of the disciples' sight, behind a cloud, into the heavens. This 'rocket ship' model of Ascension would have seemed perfectly sensible for first century people who believed in a three-tier universe; for we sophisticates of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it just seems laughable. But the point is that the Risen Jesus ceased to walk and talk and eat with his followers, as he had been doing since his resurrection. Now he was truly gone from their daily lives.

His disciples were now required to live in a time of holy absence, an in-between time, as have his followers ever since. How their hearts must have ached as he disappeared from their sight! As our hearts ache when we are faced with painful loss, whether it is the death of someone close to us, or the breakdown of a relationship that was important to us, or perhaps a loved one moving permanently a long way away, such as overseas. It is even harder to cope when there is nothing certain – at least after a death, or the end of a relationship, our next steps, however painful, are usually plain to see. Much harder to live with impending death, or the threat of change or loss, when we are not sure what will happen when.

We here are currently in a situation of communal loss where we cannot be sure what the outcome might be. Many people here are feeling a sense of acute pain and uncertainty. On the surface everything seems the same here Sunday by Sunday but our heart is missing. What will happen? What will become of us? There is no certainty.

The Anglican Church too is living in a time of uncertainty, a heightened period of holy absence, in a time not just of decline but of disintegration on many levels. The old certainties of Anglicanism – the respect of the wider community, our assured place in the establishment hierarchy, the comforting familiarity of settled prayer book worship, the parish setting of weddings and funerals – have all just about gone. Other churches are just as destabilized, in their own ways. The harsh secularism of a society with no time for anything it seems but selfish individualism has left us reeling.

The temptation is to try to cling onto the past, to try to restore the past, to search frantically for the magic formula or program that will do that. Rather, we need to be listening to what the Holy Spirit might be trying to say to us.

Because, thankfully, the Ascension is not the last word. Absence is not the last word, as is true in our own lives. As we look back on the griefs and losses in our lives, we are usually able to see that despite the pain, there was also unexpected gift, a personal growth or change of direction that would not otherwise have been possible without that loss. New life does truly come out of death.

And so it is with Jesus' departure from his earth-bound ministry – the promise that he will be with us always. Earlier in John's Gospel, we have Jesus' promise not to leave us orphaned.<sup>3</sup> He also promises us peace, with those wonderful words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid".<sup>4</sup>

The certainties that we crave do not actually give us peace, and often just mask our troubled, fearful hearts. They can close us down, and stop us from taking the risk of stepping out into the unknown. They can make us want to keep everything safely the same, even though that is not the path to life, and growth. Certainty is not

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<sup>3</sup> John 14:18

<sup>4</sup> John 14:27

the path of faith, and can seal us up even against the Holy Spirit. For the Holy Spirit, by her very nature, is unpredictable. She blows where she wills!<sup>5</sup>

As we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, whose great festival we celebrate next Sunday, let us comfort ourselves here at St John's with Jesus' words: "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

In the coming days I invite you to continue praying today's Collect:

O God,  
you withdraw from our sight  
that you may be known by our love:  
help us to enter the cloud  
where you are hidden,  
and surrender all our certainty  
to the darkness of faith  
in Jesus Christ. Amen

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<sup>5</sup> John 3:8