

## The Ascension of the Lord

Saying goodbye to someone you love is always hard. I can remember before my parents died years ago telling friends I didn't want to think about life without them. I remember visiting my beloved college music teacher on her deathbed when I was in my late 30s and feeling angry that I wasn't going to have her advice any more. There are other separations less prominent than death, but still major—children grow up and leave the nest, coworkers you enjoy get laid off or find other employment, friends you made in school graduate and go somewhere else. It's hard to say goodbye.

According to Matthew's gospel, after Jesus rose from the dead, he ordered his disciples to meet him at a certain mountain in Galilee. We don't know how he told them, how much lead time he gave them, or even if he explained why, but we may assume they figured out this was goodbye. Coming back from the dead, he had bolstered their faith, but now, mission accomplished. They had mixed feelings; Matthew tells us, when they saw Jesus, they worshiped him, but they also doubted. They probably doubted they could go on without him, especially after hearing his command: "Go, ...make disciples of all nations." Eleven guys heard this. They had seen Jesus work amazing miracles and were convinced of his power. But bring the gospel to all nations? Baptize them? Teach them the commands of Christ? How were they supposed to do that? They did not want to say goodbye.

The final words of Jesus give compelling consolation: "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." He was leaving, but not really. He would stay with them another way.

Maybe your experience is like mine, when I've lost someone I loved, hard as it was to go through, part of them always remains. I recall the experiences we shared, the wisdom I learned, the habits I formed, the insights I gained, the pastimes I enjoyed, the fears I kept. Hard as it is to admit, only after we said goodbye could they live in my heart whenever I summoned the memory. Goodbyes made me accept new responsibilities.

Jesus, of course, did something more. He remains with us in the sacraments of the church, and especially in the Eucharist. When we receive communion, the minister says to us, "The Body of Christ," so we don't miss the moment. God asks a lot of us, but he is with us.

One of my scripture professors in seminary said you could sum up the whole bible with a single word: Emmanuel. The name appears in Isaiah, and, it returns at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, where the birth of Jesus fulfilled that prophecy. The name "Emmanuel" means "God is with us." We sing, "O Come, Emmanuel," during Advent, of course. But the title also fits the Ascension of the Lord, where Jesus implies the fulfillment of the same prophecy. God is with us. Jesus will remain with us until the end of the age.

However we experience the pain of separation, we can also experience its comfort. Someone has left us, so we have new duties and we're sad. But Christ is still with us—until the end of the age.