

Sermon for 6 Easter, C  
Good Shepherd, Wareham  
May 9, 2010

Thursday is Ascension Day in the Church. It is the day when Jesus is lifted up into heaven, the last time the disciples or anybody sees him in the flesh. Even though they have been warned, when the time comes, the disciples stand there, looking up into heaven, their mouths hanging open.

Twenty four years ago I took the Episcopal ordination exams. I did very well and passed all parts. But one question I utterly blew was this: "Explain the significance of the Ascension to a parishioner." To be honest, Ascension had always baffled me. All I could think of was this: "Jesus left. We're on our own!" I could never see that the Ascension was something to celebrate.

Think about it—Jesus spends all this time with the disciples—teaching them, caring for them, getting them to believe in him, encouraging them—then WHAM!—he gets arrested and crucified. He's done. Gone. It's over.

But no—he comes back—a mind-blowing surprise—the Resurrection! He's back, in the flesh, eating, drinking, laughing, guiding, supporting. He outlines the future for the disciples-turned-apostles—"Go and teach and baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"—and he promises, **promises**, "Lo, I will be with you always, even to the ends of the earth!"

But what does he do? One day as he is hanging out with the disciples, he is lifted up, covered by a cloud—then—pouf!—he is gone. And though the angels are trying to reassure the apostles, telling them that Jesus will return again, I have to say that I am there with the apostles, mouths open, staring at the place where their leader had been. If I were there, I would feel this wail rising within me—So who's going to take care of us now? And this is a feast day? I think not.

I have a similar ambivalence towards Mother's Day. It's all well and good to talk about how wonderful mothers are and how strong a mother's love is, but I have a history of people leaving me. Especially mothers.

When I was 8, my best friend in Columbus, Ohio moved to St. Louis, which might as well have been the moon back then. When I was 12, my friend and soul-mate went to Switzerland for a year, leaving me to face junior high alone. When I was 16, my boyfriend went to college while I was still stuck in high school. When I was newly married, I nearly lost my husband in a car accident. Everyone goes through such losses, but for me they were all intensified because my mother died when I was 2½. It wasn't her fault, of course, nor was it my fault, but tell that to a two-year-old. And Mom #2 loved me and provided for me, but she wasn't the touchy-feely tender type. And when life with my father and five children go to be overwhelming, which it often did, then she would leave or threaten to leave.

So I have this big problem with Mother's Day and Ascension Day. You have this really intense relationship—you utterly depend of these people in your life—and then they up and leave. Is it too much to ask that we have someone who will be there for us, to comfort us and put bandaids on our boobos, to cuddle us, to say, "There, there, it's going to be alright" no matter what "it" is? Is it really too much to ask? I don't care how old and mature and functional we appear to be on the outside, we all still need and want a Mom. But one who is here with us, present and able, not dead or stressed or ascended.

If you think about it, though, there is a fundamental paradox with mom-hood. The whole purpose of the relationship is to work yourself out of a job. Being a “successful” mom means that you love, train, and equip your children so that they can manage on their own without you. (This is also true for fatherhood.)

Some moms just are unable to function, unable to give the needed love and care to their children. Alcoholic moms or moms in abusive relationships, or mothers who are overwhelmed with life and their own brokenness. If you had or have that kind of a mom, it’s important eventually to be able to forgive your mom’s failures. Other moms can provide love and care, but are not so good at the training and equipping part—because they really just can’t let go. They and their children get sucked into a cycle of dependency and resentment, because the ultimate purpose of mom-hood has been thwarted. Which is sending your children off without you. If you had or have that kind of mom, it’s important to still grow up and leave home, but also to forgive your mom for her failures and brokenness.

But even when you have or had a great mom who loved you, gave you the grounding and tools you needed, helped push you gently but firmly out of the nest—even when you’ve been able to grow up and function well as an adult—sometimes you’re still going to end up wailing, “I need my mommy!” You lost your job, you got sick, your marriage or love relationship ended, you’ve made a big mistake, you are in financial trouble, you’ve been terribly hurt by someone, or have lost a friend or family member to death, addictions, or misunderstandings. Mommy!

Maybe you still have a mom who can come to your aid. Maybe you don’t.

When Mom #2 died eleven years ago, I went through an intense time of grieving. For weeks at a time I walked into things and felt as though my chest was squeezed tight, that I could not breathe. Perhaps that was fear—fear of abandonment—who will take care of me now?

Two years after her death, I had a day of revelation. I realized that for 40 years I had ached for that “ideal Mom”—the tender huggy loving mom who was always gentle, supportive, kind; never angry, sarcastic, or depressed—and one who would never ever leave or threaten to leave. I looked and hoped for and desired that mom—but now both my moms were dead. They hadn’t supplied what I wanted. The revelation was that I was finally free of moms! I didn’t have to keep looking or wanting or hoping. It just wasn’t going to happen.

The other part of the revelation was that I did have what I needed and wanted after all. Jesus was the Mom I always wanted. Yes, he left the disciples—but he did not abandon them. As we heard in the Gospel, Jesus said, “Those who love me will keep my word and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them . . . the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you . . . Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” The Spirit is also called “the Comforter” and was a “she” in Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages that Jesus spoke.

Our moms send us out into the world. Jesus sent his disciples away from him, but sent them and us this Spirit—Comforter and Advocate. After Jesus ascended into heaven and sent down the Holy Spirit, he was no longer confined to just those 12 or twenty people in Jerusalem in 30AD.

Jesus the Mom, Jesus the Holy Spirit, was able to move with them across time and space, each apostle having his or her own portable Holy Spirit Mom who could comfort them, guide them, remind them of Jesus' sayings, "Give to the poor, pick up your socks, forgive those who wrong you, take out the garbage before it stinks," those kinds of things.

But this **is** the great news of the Ascension. Jesus is everywhere and is accessible to us all. Mom Jesus will never leave us. We do not need to fear abandonment, because he is with us. Always. We do not need to fear for our children or those we love, because he is with them too.

So we can pray all these Mom prayers to Jesus. Lord, Mommy, I have a boo-boo—physical pain or soul pain—please heal me. Lord, I feel so alone. Comfort me. Lord, Mommy, today I hurt someone—forgive me and help me figure out how to clean up my mess. Today someone hurt me and I wanted to beat that person up but don't think that's probably the best thing to do—what should I do?

Mom Jesus, Mom Holy Spirit is with us always. I had a spiritual director who would say, "If you call on the Holy Spirit, the Spirit **has** to answer you." Just like a loving mom who calls you back, no matter the time or day you cry out for help.

Happy Mother's Day. Happy Ascension Day. Don't forget, the one Mom who will never fail you is Jesus. Let us pray. AMEN.