

Sermon for Sunday, June 3, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"ADVANTAGES OF AN ABSENT GOD"

St. John 16:1-16

St. Luke 24:50-53

Text: "Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." St. John 16:7

If you will look back on your own life, you will discover that the saddest times that you have ever experienced were those times when you had to say good-bye for the last time. Remember when you had to tell your closest childhood friend good-bye, knowing that in all probability you would never see him again? Or the time you stood beside the bedside of a loved one, watching the last lingering light of consciousness flickering out, and you knew that never on this earth would you see that loved one again. Or the time you saw your son, or some other loved one, off to war, not knowing if he would ever return again. Yes, those times when you had to say good-bye for the last time--that was what hurt the most, and it was that which made you sad and filled your heart with grief. Did you feel like singing then? Did you feel like praising and glorifying God at that moment? No, you felt bitter and resentful, or filled with despair and loneliness.

I think that is true of most people. Do you remember the tragic, pathetic cry of David in the Old Testament at the death of his son? "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son." The most difficult thing in life is to tell a loved one farewell and put him away forever to rest. Where love has welded hearts and souls together, all partings are bound to hurt. And then, when afterwards you go back and walk alone among the familiar scenes you shared together, you find them haunted now by ghosts of precious memories. It would seem impossible that the heart could be glad at a time like that. It stretches the imagination to the breaking point to try and picture some one saying farewell to a loved one in a joyful and happy manner.

How astonishing it is then to read the words with which Luke closes his Gospel! "Jesus was parted from them. And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God." Jesus, the joy of their hearts, their most precious treasure, their dearest companion, had just been taken up into heaven and they would never on this earth see him again. They had shared his life, been given his love and companionship, had walked beside him and felt the comforting assurance of his presence--and now they were alone! They ought to have been desolate and heartbroken. They ought to have gone home with heavy steps, too sad for words. They ought to have felt and looked like men bereaved and broken down and forlorn. If they had gone straggling back to Jerusalem that day like a disorganized army, we could have understood it. I want you to realize how surprising and astonishing are the words that meet you here: "they returned with great joy, praising and blessing God."

Let us go back in our minds for a moment to that time before the cross. As Jesus tried to prepare them for the awful events of Calvary that lay ahead he said, "But now I am going to him who sent me....But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away." If the one dearest to your heart lay upon the threshold of death and said to you, "It is to your advantage that I go away," what would be your reaction? Never in a thousand years would you admit that it was best for you; and so it was with the disciples. Was the wreck of their fairest hopes to their advantage? Was the disappearance from this earth of Christ in whom they had placed their lives to their advantage? Was the pain and agony of a broken heart to their

advantage? It is no wonder our Lord said to them, "sorrow has filled your hearts."

But the ending had been inevitable and finally they had stood there at the foot of the cross with tears streaming down their faces. A limp figure hanging there, the life's blood already flown away; the laughing Roman soldiers, the sneering Jews watching--"this is best for us? This is to our advantage?"

In the minds eye let the scene shift again. Go this time to a Garden tomb. Picture the stone rolled away, the empty grave. Let your mind sift through the pictures of joyful reunion, the few precious days together, those glorious moments shared with the risen Lord. As those glorious days go by, inevitably the time of the Ascension draws near. Now, once more, the Lord is taken from them. But there is a difference this time! There is a marvelous, incredible difference! This time the disciples return with great joy! They return praising and blessing God. Why was it? Why was it that once the thought of the departure of Christ had filled them with sorrow, but now filled them with joy? What had they discovered, what had they seen, what had they learned in the presence of the risen Christ that made the difference now? Why had what had once been irreparable loss turned into an advantage? Indeed, what were the advantages of an absent Lord?

I would have you notice first of all that it had the advantage of making faith real. Was not this the reason Christ himself gave? He said, "If I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." Let us suppose the crucifixion had never happened; let us suppose that Jesus had never died on the cross and had never been placed in a tomb with a heavy stone across the mouth of it. What would have been the result? Why the disciples would never have had real faith. The blessing of those who see not, yet believe would have eluded them. In every problem that would have crossed their path, in every trouble and perplexity that came to them, in every trial and temptation that confronted them, they would have counted on seeing Jesus in person, in actually hearing his voice. But faith is not real faith when it needs the aid of the eyes and the ears; it is not faith when it needs the touch of a hand, the sound of a voice, the sight of a person, to reinforce it. It was not easy at first, and Thomas had cried out, "Unless I put my fingers in his wounds, I will not believe." But at the last he had found real faith. Out of the depths of that real faith he cried out, "My Lord and my God." So, you see, he had to go away in order that the disciples might have faith.

Do you often wish he had not gone away? Have you ever looked back wistfully across the years and envied those who walked with Christ in Galilee? I think we all find it in our hearts to wish that we could have known Jesus, could have walked with him and talked with him. But such a desire is not an expression of strong faith, but a weak faith; not a sign of faith's full development, but of its immaturity. Sir Thomas Browne once said, "I bless myself, and am thankful that I never saw Christ nor His disciples. I would not have been one of those Israelites that passed the Red Sea; nor one of Christ's patients on whom he wrought his wonders; then had my faith been thrust upon me; nor should I enjoy that greater blessing pronounced to all that believe and saw not." It means that we have the opportunity to build a personal faith which needs no external props and supports to lean upon, but a faith internalized, that stands in the strength of the Comforter--the Holy Spirit--alone.

Yes, it has brought us a faith that keeps us steady and which stands firm beneath our feet in the midst of the worst that life can do to us. So, you see, the passing of Jesus from this world where he was a visible presence was not tragic and negative, but a great advantage. What might have looked like tragic, irreparable loss was in fact a gain. Yes, it was to our advantage in order to internalize our faith.

But notice in the second place that it was to our advantage for Jesus to go away in

order to universalize the gospel--to give the gospel to the whole world. Think about it for a moment--as long as Christ was alive, he was limited to a small geographical area around Jerusalem. While he was with the 12 disciples he could not be with the people of the whole world. While he was ministering to the needy folk of Galilee, he could not minister to the needs of the world. It was only by departing from the presence of the privileged few that he could reign by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of many men and universalize.

Did you ever stop to think how many people Jesus could never help simply because he did not have the time? Did you ever think of the thousands of men and women who wanted to see him, to hear him, or tell him their troubles and sorrows, and he could not be with them all? The cry of suffering humanity was in his heart, yet there were so many of them he could not reach them all. The desperate pleas for help rang in his ears, the cry of despair and hopelessness sounded in his soul, but he could not help them all. And so it was that he could no longer be the friend and companion and Saviour of a few, but he must become the friend and companion and Saviour of the whole world. Yes, it was to our advantage that he go away. There upon the cross God gave Jesus to the ages; there upon Calvary he became my Saviour and yours; there upon the cross God gave Jesus to the whole world--he universalized the Saviour.

I would have you notice thirdly that it was to our advantage for Jesus to go away in order to energize the gospel--to put hands and feet to it. Do you remember what Paul said to the people who composed the early church? He said, "You are the body of Christ." If he had remained on earth, it would never have occurred to people to say that they were his eyes--the eyes of Christ to look out on the miseries of men with sympathy and love. It would never have occurred to us to say that we are the hands of Christ--his hand to do deeds of mercy and compassion. It would never have occurred to us to say that we were his feet--his feet to go after those lost in sin and desolation and loneliness to bring them into the bosom of God.

So it was, you see, that Christ took his departure from this world--took it in order to show men that they themselves were now his personal agents, his personal representatives on earth. Jesus left in order that you and I might be his hands, his feet, his eyes to minister in his name. It was this knowledge--that they were the agents of Christ--that sent the disciples out to give the gospel to the whole world. That is the advantage that you and I have this morning--to give energy to the gospel, to be the agents of Christ to give him to this city and to our world.

These are the advantages of an absent Lord. First the advantage of internalizing Jesus, for today we can know him too. It means that we can travel the path of life towards the sunset with the sure knowledge that there is one who walks beside us and guides us along life's way. Second, it is the advantage of a universalizing Christ who belongs to the world. From the shores of the sea of Galilee across darkest Africa, through Asia, across the whole world. To the black and the white, the poor and the rich, the educated and the ignorant--Christ belongs to us all. Third, the advantage of energizing the gospel--making it work--for we are his eyes, his hands, his feet today. Forget that and religion degenerates into a selfish, out-moded habit. Remember that you are the eyes and the hands and the feet of Christ--called upon to minister in his name--and the flame will leap upon the altar. There is nothing that can make commitment real like knowing that we--you and I--are the body of Christ.

There is an ancient legend which tells of the return of Jesus to heaven. As he approaches the gates of heaven, he is met by the angel Gabriel. "What have you accomplished on earth?" he asked, "What have you left behind you to ensure that your work will last, that your life and death counted?" Jesus replied, "I have left behind 11 men who believe in me." "But," said Gabriel, "what if they fail you?"

What if their loyalty should break; are you not taking a great risk?" Jesus replied simply, "I know them. They will not fail."

Yes, the advantages of an absent Lord--the advantage of faith internalized, the advantage of a Christ universalized who belongs to the world, the advantage of a faith energized, for we are his eyes, his hands, his feet today. But can our ascended Lord have such a confidence in us? Can Jesus say of you, "I know him. He will not fail."