

Two scenes, one disturbing piece of news.

Scene One: in John's Gospel: disciples listened to Jesus pray. This would be the final time to hear that voice before the cross. But even now, the prayer brings a shocking revelation: *Now I am no longer in the world*. Jesus would be, and in some sense already was, departed. Absent.

Scene Two: seven weeks later, those same disciples stand on a rocky outcrop east of Jerusalem. Spirits and hopes must have been high. They had Jesus back from death. Discipleship had returned to normal. Except for what happens next: *As they were watching, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight*. What the grave could not do, Ascension did: it removed Jesus from their presence, leaving them – and us – to ponder the implications of Jesus' absence.

In the Upper Room prayer, on the Mount of Olives: disciples, then and now, encounter one of the Gospel's unwelcome bumps. There will be times when Jesus seems absent. That is an unusual admission to be made in scripture, but a necessary one. Part of its necessity may owe to our need for empathy with those whose experiences force the question upon them. Where is God? Part of its necessity traces to our own times of asking about Jesus' whereabouts: when crises come, when illness falls, when family fails, when injustice holds sway. Where can we find you, Jesus?

For that, consider two lines in Jesus' prayer. The first involves a confession of closure: *I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do*. Jesus fulfilled the work for which God had sent him. But Jesus then prays: *I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world*. Which is to say, WE are in the world by God's grace and by Spirit's leading. As Christ's community, we are to *finish* the work God has passed from Christ's hands into ours. Work that especially includes bearing the presence of Christ, whether in word or sacrament or love set to deed, to those who suffer and wonder about Christ's seeming absence.

So we are called, so we are commissioned, so we are graced: to be the body of Christ.

For Reflection and Action:

*Why might acknowledging the experience of such absence be important to faith?
In times you have felt Christ's absence: what sustained your faith, or provided holy presence?
Who are the ones you have seen or experienced bearing Christ's presence in the world?*