

OK, Your Risus Paschalis, or Easter joke. Four old guys are walking down a street. They turn a corner and see a sign that says, “Old Timers Bar – ALL drinks 10 cents.”

They look at each other and then go in, thinking this is too good to be true.

The old bartender says in a voice that carries across the room, ‘Come on in and let me pour one for you! What’ll it be, gentlemen?’ There’s a fully stocked bar, so each of the men orders a martini.

In no time, the bartender serves up 4 iced martinis, shaken, not stirred, and says, “That’s 10 cents each, please.”

The 4 guys stare at the bartender for a moment, then at each other. They can’t believe their good luck. They pay the 40 cents, finish their martinis, and order another round. Again, 4 excellent martinis are produced, and the bartender again says, “That’s 40 cents, please.”

They pay 40 cents, but their curiosity gets the better of them. They’ve each had 2 martinis and haven’t even spent a dollar!

Finally, one of them says, “How in the world can you afford to serve martinis as good as these for a dime a piece?”

“I’m a retired tailor from Phoenix,” the bartender says, “and I always wanted to own a bar. Last year I hit the Lottery Jackpot for \$125 million and decided to open this place. Every drink costs a dime. Wine, Liquor, beer – it’s all the same.”

“Wow! That’s some story!” one of the men says. As the 4 of them sip their martinis, they can’t help noticing 7 other people at the end of the bar who don’t have any drinks and haven’t ordered anything the whole time they’ve been there. Nodding at the 7 at the end of the bar, one of the men asks the Bartender, “What’s with them?” The bartender says, “Oh, they’re retired people from Florida. They’re waiting for Happy Hour when drinks are half-price.”

OK, down to business. Albert Einstein humbly noted: “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.”

The Ascension is one such mystery. We just heard from the Beginning of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Luke opens with Jesus’ ascension as a bridge from the ending of his gospel. In Luke’s Gospel, the teaching, healing, rejected, and dying Jesus becomes the Lord with royal power at the right hand of the Father (2:33; 5:31; 7:56). The resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples with many proofs that, by definition, are self-evident and need no explanation – He appears and disappears, is unencumbered by locked doors, proves that He is no ghost by eating in front of them, and invites them to touch His hands and feet. With the ascension and Jesus now physically gone, the apostles will now have the Holy Spirit to guide them in their ministry and evangelization of peoples.

The period of 40 days has symbolic meaning, for 40 is the biblical number during which something important comes to pass – the great flood, Israel’s wandering in the desert, Jesus’ temptation in the desert. In Acts, Jesus uses this time to prepare His followers, give His apostles a definitive leadership role, and announce the coming of the Spirit.

Jesus further says that His kingdom is not of this world. His mission reflects Isaiah's servant figure who brings salvation to the ends of the earth (vv 6-9; see Is 42:1-4; 49:6). Jesus IS the long-awaited Messiah -- but in a surprising way -- His kingdom is not of this world. He sends His followers to inaugurate the Church with a universal mission in His name (2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5).

As Jesus is taken from their sight, 2 angels announce that He will return in the same way, echoing back to the end of Luke (21:27): "The Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." Then and now reflects the time of the Church to which all its members are called to mission. We are witnesses. We are the Church. (adapted from WEEKDAY HOMILY HELPS, 13 May 2021)

OK, so we've heard that we are supposed to be witnesses, that we are supposed to share the good news of Jesus with others. I've preached on that a number of times, so here's another angle about this mysterious feast, point 2. And please forgive me, I only have this one more point; I know you will be upset and disappointed, but -- GET OVER IT!

We could use some spirituality of Ascension in our lives. It could be also called a metaphysics of a goodbye, the anatomy of a farewell, or the pain of moving on.

Because we all experience many painful goodbyes in life, just like those bewildered 11 disciples watching Jesus disappear into the clouds. There are so many times when someone we love has to go away, or we have to go away. There are times when, for whatever reason, someone has to move on and that irrevocably changes a relationship. Almost always this is painful, sometimes so painful that it leaves us feeling restless and empty. It can seem that much of color, energy and joy have gone out of our lives.

But, as we know, usually this isn't the end of the story. Most of the time, after the restlessness and heartache of a painful goodbye has worn off, we actually experience the opposite -- a deep joy in sensing now our loved one's presence in a different way.

Parents, for example, experience this when their children grow up and leave home to start lives of their own. At first, when a child leaves home to go to college, to get married, or to take a job elsewhere, we are often left feeling empty. But after a while, especially when our child, in the full bloom of adulthood, comes back to visit us, our heartache can just as quickly disappear because our loved one, now no longer a child, can offer us a richer love and presence than they could when they were little. The pain of losing someone turns into the joy of finding something deeper in the one whom we thought we had lost.

When Jesus was preparing His disciples for His ascension, He told them: "It is better for you that I go away! You won't understand this now. You will grieve, but later, this will turn to joy and you will understand why I have to do this because, unless I go away, I can't send you my spirit."

These are the unspoken words that children say to their parents when they leave home to begin lives on their own; these are the unspoken words we say to our friends when we have to move on from a certain circle of friendship to get married; these are the unspoken words spouses sometimes say to each other when they have to grow in ways that, at the end of the day, will make their marriage stronger, but which, on a given day, leave their partner with a heartache; and these are the unspoken words we say to each other every time we have to say goodbye, even if it's just to go off to work for the day: "It is better for you that I go away, even if there is sorrow now!"

The interplay of presence and absence in love is a great mystery. We need to be present to each other physically, but we also need to be gone from each other at times. We bring a blessing both when we visit

someone and when we leave after the visit is over. Presence is partly predicated on absence and there is something of our spirit that we can only give by going away. Why is this so?

Because absence is sometimes the only thing that can purify presence. When we are physically present, there are always certain tensions, irritations, disappointments, flaws in our bodies, faults in our character, monstrous snoring that can partially block full love and blessing. We even say in our culture that after 3 days, company stinks. And these are people we love! But being together day in and day out, we often get on one another's nerves. That's why we rarely appreciate our loved ones fully, until they are taken away from us. I remember one woman saying to me at the man's funeral, "I use to yell at my husband at night for waking me up with his snoring – and now that he's gone, I'd give anything to hear him next to me again."

Absence can help wash clean. What the pain of absence does is stretch our hearts so that the essence, the beauty, the love, and the gift of the one who is absent can flow to us without being colored by the tensions, disappointments, and the flaws of everyday life. As well, the other's absence can work to stretch our hearts so that we can receive them in a way that more fully accepts and respects who they really are. That's why our children have to go away (and we have to feel the heartache) before we can accept that they are no longer children, but adults like ourselves, with lives of their own.

The mystery of saying goodbye is really the mystery of the Ascension, the most under-understood mystery both inside and outside of religion. The Ascension is about going away so that our loved ones can fully receive our spirit. It's about the mystery of saying goodbye, when goodbye isn't really goodbye at all, but only love's way of taking on a different modality so that it can be present in a way that's deeper, purer, more permanent, less-clinging, and less-limited by the tensions, inadequacies, wounds, and betrayals that, this side of eternity, forever make our intimacy a work in progress. (adapted from Rolheiser, THE MYSTERY OF PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN LOVE, posting of 28 May 2006) Once again, we see the timeless value of our rich, Catholic tradition – a mystery that happens to us all – over and over again.

Let the Church say Amen.